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March 20, 2013

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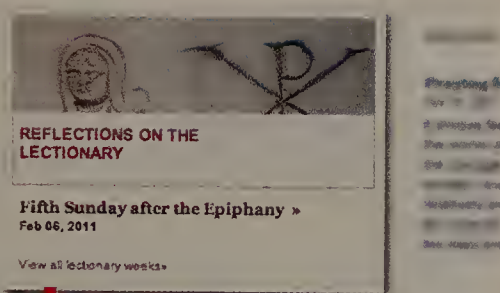
*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully*

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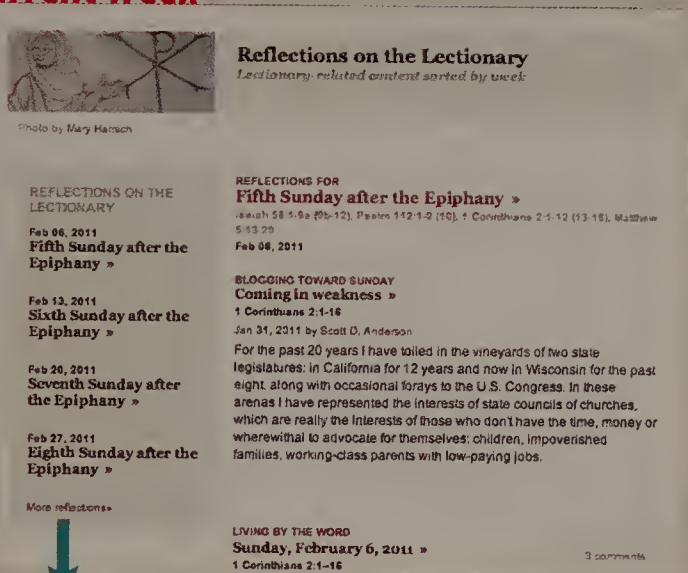
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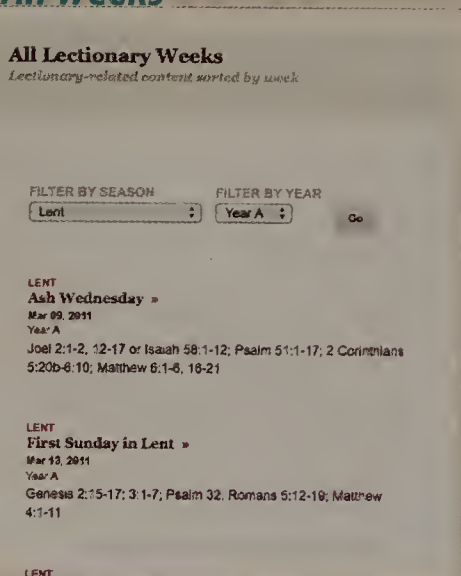
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## Easter's coming

EARLY IN MY ministry I heard Bill Laws, an experienced pastor, denominational leader and mentor, say it takes a full five years to learn enough about a congregation to be an effective pastor. After five years, Bill said, your ministry begins and you will be trusted enough to do meaningful work. He was speaking at what was my first pastors' retreat. Like others in the group of young colleagues, all of us in our first full-time positions, I was eager to get on, move up and find something more expansive and promising. We argued with Bill. Our small congregations weren't going anywhere. We were all eager to move. Five years seemed like an eternity.

It took years for me to learn that Bill Laws was right, and so I read Martin Copenhaver's reflection on long pastorates (p. 28) with great interest. One year ago I retired from a 26-year ministry with one congregation, and I'm still pondering it and feeling deep gratitude for it. I experience both nostalgia and relief that I don't have to prepare another Easter sermon. Copenhaver notes the challenge of preaching 16 Christmas Eve sermons; I recall preparing my 26th and final Easter sermon. The task seemed newly daunting, almost overwhelming. How could I preach a text that everybody had heard many times, a story many knew and held in their hearts as well as their minds?

Over the years I've been both comforted and amused by Reinhold Niebuhr's confession that on Easter and Christmas he would attend a "high" church where there would be great music but little if any preaching. No preacher, said Niebuhr, is up to the task on Easter and Christmas.

Yet in a way the years spent preaching Easter prepared me well by bringing me closer to the heart of resurrection news. Easter and Christmas sermon preparation drove me deeper into the gospel and into all the ways that resurrection has been

treated theologically, both historically and currently. Others have struggled with this story and tried to find words to express it, and as the years passed I had the companionship of many books on the subject. At the same time I was being driven more deeply into life. Losses accumulated—parents, older friends, contemporaries—and reminded me of my own mortality.

My wife's older brother—a father, husband, grandfather, great-grandfather, educator and athlete—died on the first Sunday of Lent. I was reminded that we were moving toward the celebration of resurrection. I thought of the radical conviction upon which our faith rests—that there is a power loose in the universe that overcomes even death.

My wife's father died several years ago at the same time of year. She sat by his bedside on the last night, holding his hand. "What did you do all night long?" I asked. "What did you say?"

"I ran out of things to say," she explained, "so I sang all the Easter hymns I could remember, and I said, 'Easter's coming, Daddy, Easter's coming.'" I treasure that affirmation of Easter's great unexplainable announcement.

Every year, in the midst of Easter sermon preparation, I made a point of reading John Updike's poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter." One passage is particularly striking: "Let us not mock God with metaphor, / analogy, sidestepping transcendence . . . / let us walk through the door."

Tempting as it is to try, it is a waste of time to attempt to explain the resurrection. Some things cannot be reduced to an explanation and are greatly diminished in the process of trying. The task is proclamation, not explanation—offering an invitation to "walk through the door" into a new world where the ultimate reality is not the death of all things: the ultimate reality is God and love everlasting.

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The CHRISTIAN CENTURY, (ISSN 0009-5281) is published biweekly at 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago IL 60603. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Product (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 1406523. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHRISTIAN CENTURY, P.O. Box 429, Congers NY 10920-0429.





## Learning from a distance

I was interested to read Lawrence Wood's article "Face-to-screen learning" (Feb. 20). I teach Old Testament both online and residually at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. We are the only seminary in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to offer a comprehensive distance education program accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

Since I started teaching online five years ago, I've fallen in love with it. My students have as well. I believe distance education is equal, if not superior, to residential education. My reasons have less to do with achieving lofty goals and more with human practicalities. Here are some examples.

First, all students have moments when they lose track of what the professor is saying. In a residential classroom, such a student is lost. In an online classroom, the student can rewind the lecture with a click of a mouse, listening again to what was said.

Second, as Wood noted, discussions in residential classes work well for only a small portion of the students and professors: extroverts who can think and speak very quickly and articulately. Many of us need time to sit with ideas, a few moments to mull things over or a couple of attempts at articulating our thoughts. Online discussion boards give students and professors these luxuries. Too often with residential learning, we think of great things to say only after the moment has passed.

Third, online learning recognizes that not every student is young, single and able to relocate. Residential learning places great burdens not only on students but also on their families. Many of us are unable to move across the country. We may have elderly parents nearby or children in great schools with great friends. Or we have spouses who love their jobs. Online education allows people both to learn and to do what's best for their families.

Finally, our distance programs foster



deep friendships among students. In addition to online interactions, our distance students gather on campus for two weeks every August and January. During that time, the students embody a remarkable Christian community. They create relationships they can draw on the rest of their lives.

To be sure, distance learning has challenges. For example, if I say the wrong word in an online lecture, students don't raise their hands and ask for clarification. Yet such problems are not insurmountable. (Residential learning certainly has its share of analogous challenges—like students who show up late and disrupt the class.) We professors are still learning, inventing and refining how it works.

*Matthew R. Schlimm*

*University of Dubuque Theological  
Seminary  
Dubuque, Iowa*

Wood's article about virtual seminary was interesting, but let me offer a contrary view as someone who has been a minister and for the past ten years a college teacher. More and more of my students yearn for face-to-face dialogue in a real classroom, not in their own room facing a monitor.

There are some real values in using online methods. I do so, but as a way of communicating between classes. That's called hybrid learning, and it can be very effective.

But we are losing the ability to communicate in real time by looking at one another—what Martin Buber called "I and thou," not I and my monitor. Alas, I even see real-time classrooms these days where students sit in darkness watching a screen, while a teacher watches with them. We might as well put computer chips in our students (and our parishioners) while we sit at home watching videos of teachers or preachers.

*John C. Morgan  
Reading, Pa.*

### *Failing seminaries . . .*

I couldn't agree more with William Willimon ("Making ministry difficult," Feb. 20) that our seminaries are failing both their students and the church as a whole. When I gather with other presbytery executives, we often bemoan what we see as the lack of training in organizational change, in how to create new communities of faith and in leadership development. It saddens me that the seminary presidents with whom I have talked do not see these things as priorities or their responsibility. And the church is often no better.

Our ministers and our churches would be far better served if we required Spanish rather than Hebrew or Greek.

In spite of the lack of training by seminaries and hurdles put up by the church, I am nonetheless heartened by the 20- and 30-year-olds who have stuck with it and often sought useful training outside of the church—as well as being willing to question and shake the termite-infested foundations of the church.

*Peter Nord  
Presbytery of Baltimore  
Baltimore, Md.*

*(Continued on page 44)*

March 20, 2013

## Blessing gay marriage

**T**his month the legal status of laws prohibiting same-sex marriage will be considered for the first time by the Supreme Court. Though the Court may decide the two cases before it on narrow technical grounds, the underlying issue is whether gays have a constitutional right to marry.

It's remarkable not only how much public opinion has recently shifted toward endorsing gay marriage, but how thin are the legal arguments now arrayed against it. Neither the brief offered by ProtectMarriage on behalf of California's Proposition 8 nor the one by House Republicans on behalf of the Defense of Marriage Act attempts to argue that same-sex couples are a threat to society or children. The House brief simply asserts that it is "rational" to believe that children fare better when raised by biological parents of both sexes—without marshaling much evidence for this view.

Both briefs introduce as part of their case against same-sex marriage a curious new argument about the "social risks" presented not by homosexual couples but by heterosexual couples. The point is that reckless sexual relations between unmarried heterosexuals can produce unintended offspring, which are a potential burden to society, whereas reckless sex between homosexual couples doesn't pose this threat. Therefore, the briefs say, society has reason to offer heterosexual couples, not gay and lesbian couples, the distinct benefits of marriage.

One immediate objection to this inverted argument is obvious: Why should gays and lesbians be denied the benefits of marriage because they don't present the same social risks that heterosexuals do? In any case, denying gay couples the right to marry would not do anything to steer reckless sexually active heterosexuals toward the responsibilities of marriage.

Whatever decisions the Court makes on the legal status of same-sex marriage, religious bodies are entitled under the First Amendment to articulate and live out their distinctively theological understandings of marriage. The question posed to Christians is whether the procreative possibilities of marriage are a necessary and defining element of the institution as understood theologically.

Inside and outside the church, marriage has long been defined as the lifelong commitment of two people to sharing all things in life—children, property, money, joys, sorrows, poverty, prosperity. What Christians have added to this general understanding is not an insistence on procreation but rather an insistence that marriage mirrors in some way God's fidelity to creation and to God's people. Because marriage reflects God's faithfulness, Christians believe that living out an unconditional lifelong commitment to another person offers a way of living more deeply into God's purposes for one's own life. Marriage offers a path leading one out of selfish desires into greater concern for the welfare of others. That distinctively Christian understanding of marriage would not be damaged by a legal endorsement of same-sex marriage. It could even be enhanced.

**The Christian view of marriage would not be damaged by a legal endorsement of same-sex marriage.**



# CENTURY marks

**DARWIN'S SURPRISE:** In early editions of *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin didn't express any religious beliefs, but he ended the book's third edition with a hymn in praise of God. He was in awe of the fact that "from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved." He wrote that the Creator had originally breathed life "into a few forms or into one." Darwin's 19th-century critics might not have been so surprised at this expression of religious wonder if they had known about the one book Darwin took with him on his voyages: Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Roger Rosenblatt, *Kayak Morning*, Ecco).

**CASE FOR REPEAL:** The editors of the Jesuit magazine *America* (February 25) have called for the United States to repeal the Second Amendment. The editors agree with the 2008 ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court that the amend-

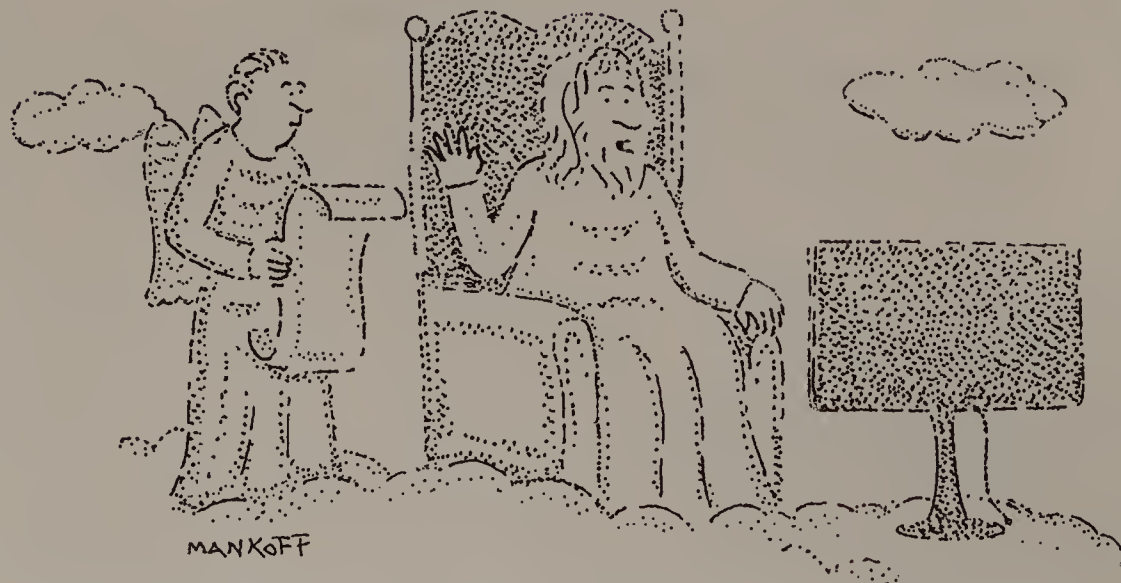
ment impedes the government in controlling the possession and use of firearms. Yet empirical evidence shows, they say, that a reduction in the number of guns reduces the number of deaths. The *America* editors realize it wouldn't be easy to repeal an amendment that has become ingrained in American life, but they point to the example of the 21st Amendment repealing the 18th, which prohibited alcoholic beverages.

**CHOOSING IGNORANCE:** Over the past 20 years the number of deaths from motor vehicle crashes has dropped by 31 percent, deaths from fire by 38 percent and deaths from drowning by 52 percent. These advances came as a result of interventions based on research. In 1996, pro-gun members of Congress were able to sharply reduce the funding that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention received for research on injury and death from firearms. Two years later, Congress curtailed research

on the subject at all agencies of the Department of Health and Human Services, including the National Institutes of Health. Since 1997 at least 470,000 people in the United States have died from gunshot wounds, including more than 165,000 who were victims of homicide (*JAMA*, February 13).

**ABANDONED:** The number of South Korean seniors who commit suicide has nearly quadrupled in recent years. The country has the highest rate of suicide by the elderly in the developed world. This trend is attributed to the fraying of the traditional Confucian social contract, according to which the elderly were taken care of by their children. In the runaway South Korean economy, many younger people have moved to urban areas, leaving their parents behind in towns occupied mostly by older people. South Korea had nothing like Social Security until 1988, so many older Koreans aren't covered by the program. The government refuses to support older people when it deems that their children have the means to care for them (*New York Times*, February 16).

**EVERYDAY RELIGION:** Ohio's John Kasich is one of several Republican governors who have agreed to the expansion of Medicaid as called for under Obamacare. Kasich cites Christian belief as a reason for not leaving the weak and vulnerable behind. The Bible runs his life "not just on Sunday, but just about every day," he said in his annual State of the State address. "And I've got to tell you, I can't look at the disabled, I can't look at the poor, I can't look at the mentally ill, I can't look at the addicted and think we ought to



"I can't deal with any famines, massacres, or epidemics right now—I've got to help some guy sink a foul shot."



ignore them,” he said. Kasich was raised Catholic and worships regularly in an Anglican church (AP).

**BAD MATH:** James Wagner, president of Emory University, created a firestorm of protest when he suggested in *Emory Magazine* that the three-fifths compromise in the U.S. Constitution is a model for resolving disagreements and working for the common good in a university. The three-fifths compromise was worked out between northern and slaveholding southern states as way to apportion seats in the House of Representatives. Three-fifths of a state’s slave population was counted for purposes of representing a state’s population. Wagner subsequently issued an apology, saying he should have said that slavery is repulsive and inhuman (InsideHigherEd.com, February 13).

**NOT AN ISSUE:** Except for white evangelical Protestants, Americans generally don’t see a couple’s differing religious beliefs as a significant stumbling block for a relationship or marriage, according to a study by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service. The bigger problem is an unsatisfying sex life. Of those surveyed, 54 percent said an unsatisfying sex life is a major problem for a relationship or marriage, while only 29 percent cited a couple’s differing religious beliefs as a major factor. Only among white evangelicals did a majority (56 percent) see religious difference as a major obstacle. (Fifty-seven percent of white evangelicals agreed that a bad sex life is a major problem.) Only 19 percent of Catholics consider differing religious beliefs a big concern for a couple (RNS).

**PROBING THOUGHTS:** Three questions that might revitalize your church: “Why does our congregation exist? What breaks God’s heart in our community? Name one spiritually transformative moment you personally experienced in the last year” (achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com, February 25).

**SANS DOGMA:** The service begins with a song, but instead of playing a hymn, the band plays “Don’t Stop Me

“The State Department’s conflict stabilization budget is about \$60 million a year now. That’s how much the movie *The Avengers* took in on a single Sunday last May. The difference is the folks that we have on the ground doing this job are actually real superheroes.”

— Secretary of State **John Kerry** in a speech at the University of Virginia in which he argued for increased investment in U.S. diplomacy and foreign aid (www.state.gov)

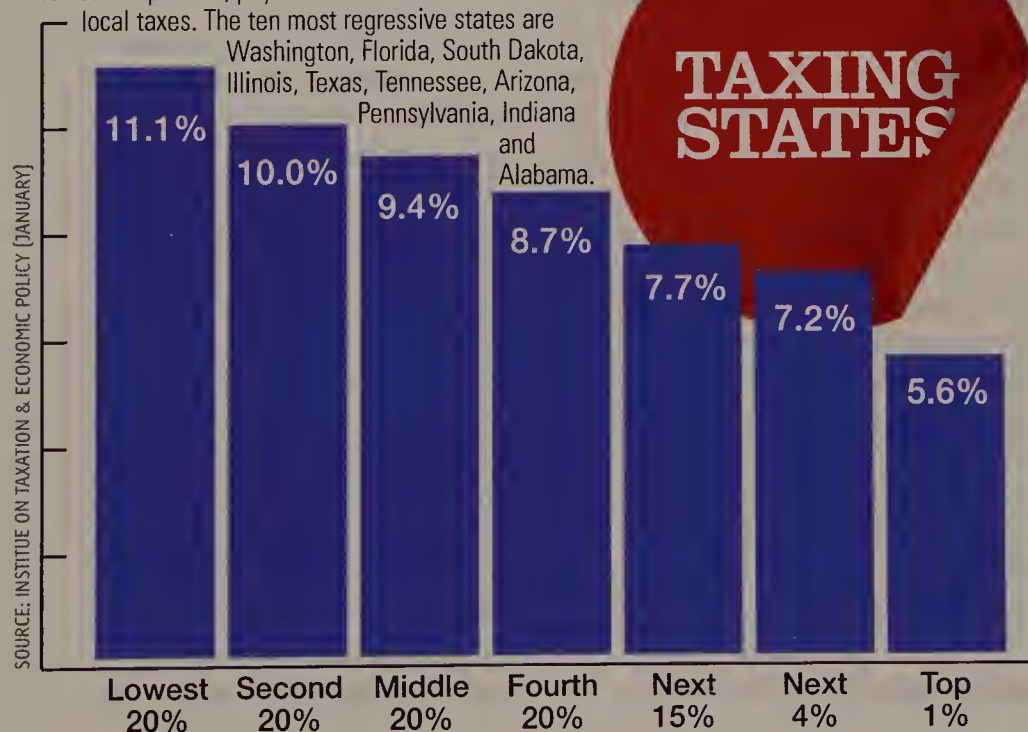
“We have stories about child molesters, murders and all kinds of vicious, barbaric acts of evil committed by heinous criminals on our front page, and yet we never receive a call from anyone saying ‘I don’t need my children reading this.’ Never. Ever. However, a story about two women exchanging marriage vows and we get swamped with people worried about their children.”

— **Jim Cegielski**, owner of the *Laurel* (Mississippi) *Leader-Call*, responding to criticism about the paper’s coverage of a lesbian wedding (RNS)

Now,” by Queen. There is a reading, time for silent reflection and time for greeting others. This is the pattern at an atheist “church,” which meets in a deconsecrated church in Islington, north of London. In place of a sermon on a recent Sunday, a Cambridge University physicist talked about wonder. An offer-

ing is taken to care for the facility, and the group intends to organize for community service in the future. Its motto: “Live better, help often, wonder more.” An enthusiastic participant said, “It’s got all the good things about church without the terrible dogma” (*Guardian*, February 3).

People with lower incomes tend to pay a higher percentage of their income on state and local taxes. The chart shows the national average of what wage earners, from the top 1 percent to the lowest 20 percent, pay out of their income for state and





# The half-believer

by Chris Herlinger

**THE PAPERBACK** edition of Pico Iyer's book *The Man Within My Head*, which is both a memoir and an essay on novelist Graham Greene (1904–1991), came out earlier this year. Iyer, a British-born essayist, reporter, travel writer and novelist, is the author of *Video Night in Kathmandu* and many other books. He has been described as “Thomas Merton on a frequent flier pass.” I had a chance to talk to him about his interest in Greene's novels.

**To what can we ascribe the durability of Graham Greene as not only a literary figure but a figure “within people's heads”?**

That may arise out of his gift for intimacy on the page, the sense of vulnerability his characters incarnate and the fact that he seems to be as open in his fiction as he was guarded in real life. His novels read like confessionals, and to that extent they may speak to many readers—of any faith or none.

I was stunned at how many writers have been possessed by Greene, for better or worse. Paul Theroux, John Banville, Gloria Emerson and Alan Judd all wrote novels haunted by figures clearly based on Greene, who stands sometimes for prophetic wisdom (in Theroux's *Picture Palace*) or moral clarity (in Emerson's *Loving Graham Greene*), sometimes (in Banville and Judd) for almost demonic mischief making. David Lodge dedicated an early novel to Greene and yet included a parody of Greene in that same novel. Greene's official biographer, Norman Sherry, who spent 27 years trying to catch Greene, seemed to end up as Greene the figure of self-doubt and failure, not Greene the fearless adventurer (whom perhaps he'd hoped to become).

**Is there a core to Greene's work?**

I think it's precisely the fact that Greene doesn't sit easily or simply within any religious tradition that allows him to speak to so many. He read theology constantly and always refers to God, but it's a God he doesn't always claim to know and often doesn't even claim to believe in. He called himself a “Catholic agnostic” and often said that he had faith (the emotional pull that for many lies at the heart of religion) but not belief (the rational conviction).

To me, he always placed kindness before anything, and many of his novels are illustrations of how anyone can act compassionately and with understanding, even if faith is flagging. The whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* famously does everything possible to

**“Greene disarms us because he comes at faith through the back door.”**

violate the letter of his creed—drinking, taking on a mistress, being negligent in his duties—and yet in a moment of crisis acts with self-sacrifice and devotion, embodying the spirit of his faith in a way that even a cardinal or saint might envy.

**Did Greene redefine what it might mean to be a religious person in a world without a set of defined markers?**

As I see it, Greene was extending a forgiving hand toward even the most fallen person and noting how even if we—as he—can never quite make it to the belief we want, we can still try to act from the sense of compassion and sympathy that faith speaks for. If nothing else, he seemed to believe that religion



PHOTO BY DEREK SHAPTON

gave stakes to events and turned right and wrong into a matter of good and evil.

If Greene could never be a perfect Catholic, he was certainly always much further from a nonbeliever's position, and even tougher on cynicism or disengagement. More than almost any writer I can think of, Greene was fascinated by goodness—and peace and kindness—even though, and sometimes because, he felt those qualities weren't his. His books

could be said to be hymns to selflessness and purity written by one who longed for those graces but felt he had never deserved them.

He disarms us because he comes at faith through the back door, through the sinner rather than the saint and by stressing humanity rather than holiness. But if you pursue those deeply enough and steadfastly enough you can arrive at a man giving up his life for others.

**You've said that Greene the Catholic**

Chris Herlinger is a freelance journalist, writer with Church World Service and coauthor (with Paul Jeffrey) of *Rubble Nation: Haiti's Pain, Haiti's Promise*.



**doesn't interest you because that role was not of interest to him at the deepest level. Yet it's impossible to talk about him without talking about religion.**

I would say he is the poet laureate of the half-believer, or of the person who longs for belief, and most of his work takes place in that shadowland where the man of faith suddenly encounters doubt and the nonbeliever is suddenly shaken by something that looks very close to a miracle or an act of faith.

Greene did famously convert to Catholicism in his early twenties in order to marry his devout wife Vivien (who had first written to him because he had misrepresented an aspect of the Virgin Mary); but I would say he took the church into his

life as he took his wife: both became frequent sources of solace and guidance and inspiration but also frequent antagonists, whom he deserted and treated badly.

**The day after the mass shootings in Colorado last year, I heard some people say that they could never do what that shooter did. I don't agree—I think good people have the capacity to murder. And I think that's a perspective Greene would share.**

A Greene character isn't a church-goer who says, "I could never act like the devil." Rather, he's a self-proclaimed (self-chastised) nonbeliever who says, "I could never act like a saint"—and then does so, almost in spite of himself.

Greene is always reminding us of how little we know of one another. And intentions in his work are slippery, which is why he keeps on flaunting his paradoxical belief that good motives can be the quickest way to hell. Greene shows imperfect men transcending themselves.

Were he writing of the terrible tragedy in Colorado, Greene wouldn't concentrate on the deranged killer; he would describe a man taking his girlfriend to the movies, even though he's not faithful to her—and is on the brink of breaking up with her and is secretly texting some new love. And then, when the violence breaks out, Greene would show that man giving up his life to save the girlfriend he no longer loves. **CC**

## A church clears a path

# Clutter buster

by Barbara Melosh

**YES, WE ALL KNOW** that the church is not a building or a steeple. Yet I believe that a church building is often an outward and visible sign of a congregation's spiritual condition. I learned this during my pastorate at Saints and Sinners (not its real name), when I spent more time on property concerns than I had ever imagined possible. Like many city congregations, Saints and Sinners is getting smaller and smaller and losing ground in the struggle to maintain a large aging building. As one colleague put it, "A lot of us are one furnace failure away from closing."

When I first walked into Saints and Sinners, I knew that I was in a worship space cherished by church members. The large brick structure was rebuilt after a fire in the late 1930s. It's a handsome building trimmed in peach marble, with a steep slate roof rising to a steeple topped with a

cross. On one corner, oak doors decorated with intricate wrought-iron hinges open onto stairs leading up to the narthex. Light filtered through blue and red stained-glass windows and rested on oak pews and a pulpit of elaborately carved wood.

Even here, though, I saw signs of decline. The altar was covered by a crumpled altar cloth under scratched Plexiglas. A three-quarter-sized plaster Jesus stood with eyes downcast and arms outstretched; on his right hand, three fingers were broken off. The dull red carpet was threadbare in places; when we replaced it we discovered that it was more than 50 years old. Near the entrance was a deep scorch mark in the shape of an iron, probably left by someone trying to remove wax from the carpet.

The rest of the building registered decline more acutely. Painted walls were scuffed and peeling. Carpeting was worn

and stained—and clutter was overtaking the place.

I can relate. Like many of us, I'm overwhelmed by my own accumulation of stuff, and congregations are the same. As one colleague astutely observed, people feel free to leave items in church buildings, but no one takes responsibility for getting rid of anything. Partly it's a matter of will and energy. But it's also a question of ownership. Members don't feel they have the authority to get rid of anything. Besides, we tell ourselves mournfully, no one is using the old youth room anyway, so . . .

More than once our church received unsolicited "donations"—bags of clothing left on the steps, a tattered, overstuffed chair that we had to call the city to remove. But most of the stuff comes from our members. Usually they have

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*Barbara Melosh lives in Wilmington, Delaware.*

some vague notion that the church will find their discarded items useful or pass them on to someone who will. Sometimes the stuff is left over from one of our flea markets. Many members live in small row houses that have little storage space, so they use the church. The parsonage contained two cabinet sewing machines belonging to a member who had no place for them but didn't want to get rid of them. A large part of the church basement was a makeshift workspace that held tools used by members for repairs and property projects—and many other tools stored there by a church member. We also had several members who never came across an object that didn't suggest a likely potential for future use—and then brought it to the church.

When I arrived I explored the building and discovered one large storage closet packed from top to bottom with plastic grocery bags; another was filled with boxes of glass water pitchers. Stacks of milk cartons held empty jars. In the basement narrow trails led through teetering piles of rusty buckets, televisions, small appliances and tools.

The clutter had claimed what the congregation called the Scout room, although Boy Scouts had not convened there for years. A mildewed couch and matching chairs in faded blue velour hid a gorgeous

stone fireplace. I found a display case filled with trophies won by a congregational softball team. A large locked metal cabinet contained karaoke equipment.

In a large Sunday school room across the hall, storage cabinets held craft supplies, including yellowing paper and tins filled with thousands of crayons. The walls were covered with a dozen warped bulletin boards, along with framed 1950s illustrations of Bible stories and an oversized print of the beloved Warner Sallman portrait of Jesus.

In my first few months at Saints and Sinners, I gathered a few people to do long-term planning. Clearing these rooms

sions began to wane. No one, including me, wanted to lead a project that was bound to stir up more than dust.

But one Sunday morning a thirty-something mother appeared with a winsome five-year-old, and I showed them the way to the Sunday school class. As I led her into the room I saw her reaction to the mess. She backed out abruptly, pulling her son by the hand. Seeing the room through her eyes filled me with new resolve. The stuff had to go.

I called together my troops, two women who had been chafing at the mess for a while. Charlene was a resourceful and determined clutter buster

## In the basement, narrow trails led through piles of appliances.

was on the list of goals; I wasn't the only one who saw the clutter as a problem. Still, I knew that the job wasn't going to be easy.

A dedicated volunteer who spent hours managing the building was also the congregation's most avid collector. He resisted any effort to get rid of "stuff." We were also challenged by the watchdogs of the budget—long-standing members who stalwartly opposed any initiative that involved spending money. The enthusiasm of our brainstorming ses-

sions began to wane. No one, including me, wanted to lead a project that was bound to stir up more than dust. But one Sunday morning a thirty-something mother appeared with a winsome five-year-old, and I showed them the way to the Sunday school class. As I led her into the room I saw her reaction to the mess. She backed out abruptly, pulling her son by the hand. Seeing the room through her eyes filled me with new resolve. The stuff had to go. I called together my troops, two women who had been chafing at the mess for a while. Charlene was a resourceful and determined clutter buster

We spirited away the mildewed furniture and relocated a few large items that we were keeping. But then the project went into a stall with mountains of stuff still in place. No one would take responsibility for sorting through the troves and deciding what to throw out. With irritation tinged with begrudging admiration, I realized I had been outmaneuvered; the congregation was giving me a lesson in the power of passive resistance. The painters were scheduled to arrive in a week, and there was no way I could muscle out all that stuff myself.

Then, just as I was beginning to despair, the Lord provided me with a couple of ringers. My 21-year-old son called to ask if I could help a friend who'd been remanded to 40 hours of community service. Did I have something the miscreant could do?

Did I ever! I explained the project. The next day my son and his friend arrived, and for five days in the middle of an August heat wave they attacked the

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### Her cry,

the morning when she finds the tomb empty  
leaps from her the way the first spry geyser  
sprang from the Titanic. She bangs her knee  
and ducks to look again. Her adviser,  
John, warned her it was dangerous to come.  
Holed up behind locked doors, the gang of guys  
who claimed to love him. She runs her thumb  
across the ledge where his dead body lies.

Or rather doesn't. Her heart's a cypress  
forming a final growth ring, final grief:  
his body gone, his lithe hand, the small scar  
from the sharp chisel. To what can she say yes?  
Who is she now? Where to put belief?  
Her cry gashes the fragile morning air.

Jeanne Murray Walker



clutter. As fans churned, the guys dismantled bulletin boards, unscrewed light fixtures, moved furniture and pulled up the dirty carpets, releasing clouds of dust. We hauled bag after bag of trash out of the rooms.

We tried to preserve what was valu-

## A church is not a building, but buildings matter a lot.

able—the Sunday school banner that looked to be 1920s vintage, faded snapshots of Sunday school kids who were now teenagers, and of course, the softball trophies.

The next week painters and carpet installers arrived. In the Sunday school room, the multihued carpet picked up the muted blue-green of the walls. In the Scouts room, the same shade set off the gray stone of the fireplace. I found myself returning again and again to marvel at the transformation.

That Sunday I asked the congregation to come downstairs after worship to help move bookcases and tables back into the rooms. As people filed downstairs, I watched eagerly for their reactions. Charlene and Georgia stood off to the side, looking guarded.

One person after another came into the Sunday school room carrying tables, chairs and bookshelves. But no one said anything. Their faces were unreadable.

In growing consternation I went over to one member who was carrying chairs. “So, what do you think?” I asked, trying for a brightly casual tone.

“Um, who picked the colors?” he asked carefully.

Then, from his mother-in-law: “It looks like a circus tent!”

In earshot of this review, Georgia looked grim and Charlene flushed unhappily. But if anyone else in the congregation had an opinion about the makeover, I never heard it.

Exhausted by the project and the congregation’s impassive reception of it, I raged inwardly. I felt ignored—and upset on behalf of Charlene and Georgia, who had taken risks for the project. They said that this was just how the people were at

Saints and Sinners—stolid Germans who seldom offered praise. I decided that the response was a register of the cost of change. Most people knew that the rooms had been neglected, but some were angry or shamed when a few of us acted to clear them out. Maybe there was

pain in the letting-go even when people knew that the letting-go was necessary.

The next day the phone rang. A young mother had moved into the neighborhood and wondered if we had a room that could be used for a parent-and-toddlers group. I startled her with a burst of laughter and then said yes, I thought we had a space that would work.

The choir moved out of its cramped space and into the Boy Scouts room. At first they complained. The acoustics were unfamiliar, and they missed the intimacy of their old room. But then a newcomer appeared and wanted to join the choir, and in the new space there was room for

the additional chair and music stand. The week after that, another member joined.

In the next few years we took on a few more property projects. Each one was received with grumbling at the planning stage and silence at completion. Yet every time, these changes opened up space that was filled with new life. Toddler groups, kids’ music classes, a yoga class and even a community theater were meeting in our building. Visitors complimented us on the building’s appearance, and neighbors appreciated the congregation’s welcome of community groups.

I’d like to say that the congregation ultimately embraced these changes. But some members resented and still resent the newcomers. Conflict over the use of the building escalated. People are even more reluctant to assume responsibility for property matters. And of course, more clutter has begun to accumulate in the basement.

I realized that I had to accept the uneven reactions even as I—and many others—celebrated the results of change. Yes, I still believe that a church is not a building. But buildings matter a lot. They are signs of our spiritual condition and resources for our ministries. Our challenge is to use them well, so that they are not monuments but living stones, sheltering and nurturing new life. CC

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## A perplex raising

The man on death row in the federal penitentiary writes to me On lined loose-leaf paper that when he was a boy in the South He was so absorbed by tent revivals that he knew he would be A preacher, knew it in his deepest bones. I would stand on my Bed and preach to the babies, and stand on a barrel and preach To the chickens and the hogs, and preach the Word to the cow, Who would not come to Jesus nor to anyone else neither. Well, That is not how things turned out for me, which is a long story, But what I want to get down in this letter is the blessings I had When I was a boy. Now there is much to say that was not at all In the least blessed, it was a violent and perplex raising we had, But what I want to get down is that was a time of great wonder And satisfaction for me because I knew what I was going to be. I could spend a lot of time explaining how I came to not be that Which I knew I was going to be but I have wasted enough time In that fruitless pursuit. Thank you for reading this letter, which Is a kindness on your part. It allowed me to remember a blessed Time, there on the old barrel preaching the Word to the animals.

**Brian Doyle**



## From Gotham City to Capitol Hill

by John Dart  
News Editor

**T**he National Council of Churches, long strapped for cash, is leaving its costly digs in Manhattan and consolidating with a slimmer staff in a Washington, D.C., office within walking distance of two branches of the federal government.

Therein lies a tale of church leaders who sought to wield moral influence from the high-rise “God Box” in New York but have shifted to the triangle-shaped United Methodist Building, said to house the only nongovernmental offices on Capitol Hill.

“The critical NCC policy work can be coordinated from any location,” said Peg Birk, transitional general secretary of the council, “but to be the prophetic ‘voice of the faithful’ on the ground in the places of power, it is best served by establishing our operations in Washington.”

The Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive was envisioned in the 1950s as “the Protestant Vatican on the Hudson.” Philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, an American Baptist, was influential in its planning and financing. President Dwight D. Eisenhower helped to break ground for the building in 1958, and it was dedicated two years later.

The National Council of Churches, made up of 37 member communions, occupied three floors of the Interchurch Center in the 1960s. Three denominations had their headquarters in the building, as did some church-related agencies. But amid antiwar protests, civil rights movements and sociocultural changes,

the established churches in the late '60s saw the start of a long decline in church memberships.

When the God Box was rededicated in 2010, the NCC had gone through a series of downsized budgets. Michael Kinnamon, then NCC general secretary, said the building never became a Protestant Vatican. He and other Protestant ecumenists welcomed Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim neighbors in the building.

With the NCC's 2011–12 budget showing a \$1.1 million deficit, which was covered by shrinking reserve funds, council officials framed new program priorities, cut staff and reduced spending. A key report last year rejected a management style that it termed rigid

and outmoded in favor of one that was “agile, integrated and flexible.”

On February 13, executives announced that the NCC will relocate most of its staff to Washington—a staff that had six fewer administrative employees and that reflected other personnel cuts made last year. Three satellite offices will remain in New York in other facilities for two associate general secretaries, Joseph Crockett and Antonios Kireopoulos, and a third person, Ann Tiemeyer, program director of women's ministries.

NCC president Kathryn Lohre, while expressing reverence for the council's history “in the beloved God Box,” said that consolidation at its existing office in Washington “will enable us to witness



UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE / KATHLEEN BARRY

**NEW HEADQUARTERS:** Constructed of Indiana limestone in 1923, the United Methodist Building is the only nongovernment building on Capitol Hill. Its annex will now house the main headquarters of the National Council of Churches, which is ending its long residency at New York's Interchurch Center.



more boldly to our visible unity in Christ, and work for justice and peace.”

The move will yield \$400,000 to \$500,000 in annual savings, according to Birk. The NCC Washington office—which has been in the United Methodist Building for at least 28 years—occupies a ground-floor suite at 110 Maryland Avenue, an annex around the corner from the Methodist entrance at 100 Maryland Avenue.

Birk will join Cassandra Carmichael, who directs the NCC’s Washington office and a task force on environmental ministries, and Shantha Ready Alonso, director of the NCC’s poverty initiative. Birk said outside vendors will be hired to provide office, accounting, communications and other services.

“I’ve long urged the NCC to consolidate their offices in our building, and I’m pleased they have finally done so,” said Jim Winkler, general secretary of the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, in an e-mail interview. That agency owns and operates the building. The NCC rent “remains the same,” Winkler said.

Occupants of the main building, which include offices of some other Methodist agencies, already constitute a mini-God Box. Among the tenants, Winkler said, are the Washington offices for the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), plus Catholic Relief Services, the Churches for Middle East Peace and the Islamic Society of North America.

At 200 Maryland Avenue, a like-minded neighbor is the Baptist Joint Committee, which addresses church-state issues, and like the Methodists finds the proximity of the Capitol and the Supreme Court a valuable asset.

If the NCC structure in New York City once merited iconic status, the United Methodist Building, with an even longer history, still does. The corner site was purchased to build a five-story building, completed in 1923, to house Methodist offices, especially its Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals. Orator-politician William Jennings Bryan spoke at the building’s January 1924 dedication.

To finance expansion of their social witness, the Methodists built an annex at

110 Maryland Avenue in 1931. “For many years,” said Winkler, “it primarily consisted of apartments rented to members of Congress and Supreme Court justices.” Gradually, most of the 55 apartments were converted into offices.

The main building has been a focal point for protests and marches, including causes espoused by farmworkers and Native Americans, and it sometimes served as a refuge for anti-Vietnam War protesters. The women’s rights movement used the building to organize support for the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early ’80s. The Americans with Disabilities Act had its genesis in the building, which was also the ecumenical center for the 1980 and 1990 Earth Day celebrations.

The structure’s Simpson Memorial Chapel—opened in 1929 and often refurbished—has hosted a number of religious rallies. On the night in 1983 when Congress passed legislation making Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a national holiday, celebrants, including Coretta Scott King, lit 150 candles there to express thanks.

The Methodists’ initial impetus to build a center at the heart of Washington was to lobby for Prohibition. When the ban on alcoholic beverages became law in 1920, church leaders said they still had mandates to oppose gambling and obscenity and to act on other moral issues. Their intensified antiliquor campaign years later could not prevent the constitutional amendment’s repeal in 1933.

Winkler and the church’s social justice arm have been criticized by Christian conservatives as too liberal, but the worldwide denomination has kept its traditionalist stance on most homosexual issues.

And while not all Methodists are teetotalers, the denomination includes a “strong commitment to alcohol avoidance” in its Book of Discipline.

“Normalizing alcohol use is an ongoing concern and threat to public health,” said Winkler, who asked church members this year to observe an alcohol-free Lent. “Consider how much money you spend on alcohol over the 40-day period,” he said. Winkler advised that such money be given instead to alcohol-abuse prevention projects.

## All eyes on S.C. and Texas church property fights

When disgruntled congregations have left hierarchical denominations such as the Episcopal Church, they’ve often lost property battles as civil courts ruled that buildings and land are not theirs to keep.

But outcomes could be different this year, court watchers say, as high-profile cases involving dozens of Episcopal congregations in South Carolina and Texas wind their way through state courts. That prospect has observers watching for developments that could shape legal strategies in other states and denominations.

Both cases involve conservative dioceses that voted to leave the Episcopal Church over homosexuality, among other issues.

In South Carolina, congregations representing about 22,000 people are suing the Episcopal Church for control of real estate worth some \$500 million and rights to the diocese’s identity. In Texas, the national Episcopal Church is suing about 60 breakaway congregations in the Fort Worth area for properties estimated to be worth more than \$100 million.

The Episcopal Church argues, as it has in past cases, that local properties are held in trust for the denomination and can’t be turned over to parishioners who choose to disaffiliate. But recent court actions are giving breakaway groups hope that things might go differently this time.

In South Carolina, plaintiffs are encouraged by a 2009 ruling by the state supreme court that allowed All Saints Church of Pawley’s Island to retain property despite having left the Episcopal Church.

If other breakaway churches have similar documents as All Saints did—deeds and contracts that show no intention to hold property in trust for the Episcopal Church—then they could win, according to Lloyd Lunceford, a Louisiana attorney and editor of *A Guide to Church Property Law*.

“When no trust exists at all, the local church wins,” Lunceford said. “The South Carolina Supreme Court, like many state supreme courts, has held that



the mere presence of an assertion of a trust [existing] in a denominational constitution is insufficient to create a valid legal trust. There has to be more.”

In considering the breakaway churches’ appeal in the Fort Worth case, the Supreme Court of Texas is hearing its first church property case since 1909. The court is expected to clarify whether church property disputes in Texas will be decided by so-called “deference principles,” which prevailed in 1909 and tended to favor hierarchical entities.

Another option is to apply “neutral principles,” which consider such factors as canon law, state law and agreements made among local churches, dioceses and other denominational entities.

Courts have increasingly used neutral principles, observers say, in part to avoid becoming ensnared in polity or theological debates. If the Texas high court uses that approach, then departing churches could win on the grounds that Texas law broadly allows for the revocation of trusts, according to Scott Brister, a former justice of the Texas Supreme Court who’s representing the Fort Worth defendants.

Revocable trusts, Brister said, include any that might be established by the Episcopal Church’s so-called Dennis Canon, which was added in 1979 and says parish properties are held in trust for the Episcopal Church.

“We’ve got defenses that say we never agreed to the Dennis Canon, but let’s say for the sake of argument that we did [agree to it],” Brister said. “Under Texas law, you can revoke it,” he said, adding that the Diocese of Fort Worth did exactly that more than 20 years ago.

The Episcopal Church, however, has a history of winning property cases—and expects to build on that success. Fort Worth bishop Rayford B. High Jr. argues that the Dennis Canon is binding since local churches agreed to abide by it.

“They were given access to church titles and church properties because they promised to abide by the Episcopal Church,” High said. “Commitments were made. You can’t just decide a little later on, ‘I think I’ll change my mind.’”

In South Carolina, the case is no slam dunk for recently departed churches, according to Martin Nussbaum,



RNS / COURTESY EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

**FACING LAWSUIT:** Bishop Mark Lawrence heads South Carolina’s Episcopal Church, which is being sued by congregations seeking to break away but keep church properties.

a Colorado Springs lawyer who specializes in church property cases. He notes that the Episcopal Church has prevailed in most of its property cases, in part because local churches have agreed to abide by the Episcopal Church’s constitution.

But, he adds, the South Carolina Supreme Court 2009 Pawley’s Island decision could help today’s plaintiffs win.

“It’s possible that the secessionists will have some success for some time, as long as they’re in the South Carolina courts,” said Nussbaum, an attorney with Rothgerber Johnson and Lyons. “If it goes over to [the U.S. Supreme Court], they’ll lose.”

To date, the U.S. Supreme Court has shown little interest in reviewing state decisions in church property cases. Brister expects that will not change and that state decisions will stand.

The high court’s reticence to intervene might bode well for breakaway Anglicans in South Carolina, according to Robert Tuttle, professor of law and religion at George Washington University Law School.

“In South Carolina, where the South Carolina Supreme Court has ruled in favor of a separating congregation, [lower court justices] might be more sympathetic to the claim of the separating diocese of South Carolina” than judges in other states might be, Tuttle said.

Both the Texas and South Carolina cases are being watched closely, in part because of their size. Both involve dioceses and dozens of churches in large states, where jurisprudence can influence how judges in other states approach property cases, according to Brister. The Texas decision “could influence other states, depending on what the circumstances of their state laws are,” he said.

—G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS

## Conservatives see limits of Benedict’s reign

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, the surprising choice cast a pall over the liberal wing of the flock and left conservatives giddy with the prospect of total victory.

Ratzinger had for decades served as the Vatican’s guardian of orthodoxy, the man known as “God’s Rottweiler,” and his vocal fans were crowing about the glorious reign to come.

“He’ll correct the lackadaisical attitudes that have been able to creep into the lives of Catholics,” M. Price Oswalt, an Oklahoma City priest who was in St. Peter’s Square that April day, told the *New York Times*. “He’s going to have a German mentality of leadership: either get on the train or get off the track. He will not put up with rebellious children.”

Now, however, with Benedict retired eight years later in an unprecedented departure, many on the Catholic right are counting up the ways that Benedict failed them and wondering how their favorite watchdog turned into a papal pussycat.

“Although Pope Benedict XVI’s highly unusual resignation is said to be for reasons of health, it fits the character of his papacy: all his initiatives remain incomplete,” Michael Brendan Dougherty, a Latin mass enthusiast, lamented. “He was consciously elected to rescue the church from itself, but he failed to finish what he started,” Dougherty said.

Since then the criticisms have continued to come in from a range of onetime champions, and on a spectrum of issues:



Benedict did not sufficiently clean house in the clergy sexual abuse scandal and did not appoint enough hard-liners to the hierarchy; he did not bring the old Latin rite schismatics fully back into the fold, a mission that will likely end with his pontificate; he was too quick to mollify Muslims or pursue ecumenical gestures; and he charted, as Dougherty put it, “a precarious middle course” theologically.

Even his three encyclicals—the most authoritative documents a pope writes—focused on social justice issues and often embraced the kind of liberal policy prescriptions that send conservatives into conniptions.

To be sure, liberals would note that theologians and even American nuns were investigated and disciplined under Benedict’s rule, and he appointed some pretty staunch conservatives as bishops and promoted others to the College of Cardinals that will choose one of their number to succeed Benedict.

But if he was not exactly a pleasant surprise to the left, neither did he fulfill the great expectations of the right.

Disappointment may have been inevitable because the hopes of Benedict’s fans had blinded them to the parts of his writings (on charity and justice, for example) or his personality traits (such as his

loyalty to friends, no matter how incompetent) that didn’t fit with their plans.

That leads to a second factor, which is that popes may enjoy great authority but cannot act like autocrats. Benedict, more than his supporters, knew he had to be the pastor of a huge global flock, not just a “bad cop” who tells people to follow the rules and drums them out when they disobey.

Finally, Ratzinger was always at heart—and in his head—a scholar and theologian. He had a German’s intellectual bearing but little of his countrymen’s renowned knack for organization. “I am not an administrator,” he warned his fellow cardinals during the 2005 conclave as he saw the momentum swinging in his direction. —David Gibson, RNS

## Evangelicals embraced a like-minded pope

As word spread in February of the pope’s resignation, many evangelicals lamented the impending loss of a powerful spokesman for their conservative causes.

“Pope Benedict XVI has exemplified moral courage and an unwavering commitment to the gospel message,” said Ralph Reed, chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a conservative Christian political group. “We honor him for his lifelong service to the Lord and his inestimable intellectual contribution to Christian orthodoxy.”

The high praise—“evangelical Benedictions,” you might say—extended beyond U.S. borders as well.

“I appreciate his courage of ideas, even when they did not resonate with contemporary attitudes,” said Geoff Tunnicliffe, secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance. “I was especially moved by his boldness in warning us of the dangers of moral relativism and the tyranny of self-centered ideologies.”

Just a generation or two ago, such lavish praise might have been unthinkable. During the 1960s, evangelist Billy Graham—sometimes dubbed the Protestant pope—took heat for inviting Catholics to join his revivals. But after the modernizing

reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), denominational barriers fell and ecumenism prospered.

Meanwhile, evangelicals developed an appreciation for Catholic culture, and Catholics found ready evangelical allies in the battles against secularism, abortion and gay rights.

“One of the challenges of evangelical Protestantism as it became a political force was to find a vocabulary to talk about the role of Christian faith in a diverse, pluralistic society like the United States,” said R. R. Reno, executive editor of *First Things*. “By and large, they turned to Catholicism.”

*First Things* founder Richard John Neuhaus was a key figure in bridging the gap between Catholics and evangelicals. Along with the late evangelical activist Charles Colson, he formed Evangelicals and Catholics Together in 1994, a group that bonded in part over shared admiration for the late Pope John Paul II.

More recently, Catholic, evangelical and Orthodox leaders backed the Manhattan Declaration in 2009, a document that professes their common support for “the sanctity of life, traditional marriage and religious liberty.”

The political fruits of evangelical-Catholic marriage might be seen in the presidential candidacy of Rick Santorum, who enjoyed strong backing from evangelicals, even as he struggled to connect with fellow Catholics.

Which is not to say that evangelical leaders are about to “swim the Tiber,” as they say, and convert to Catholicism.

“At least one of the many faults of the papacy is the idea that a monarchical head can speak for any church,” R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said February 11. Still, the evangelical leader balanced his doctrinal critique with the kind of praise voiced among allies in today’s culture wars.

When Benedict visited New York and Washington in 2008, evangelical theologian and Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw said the pope “has an important pastoral role in the broader Christian community. In many ways and on many subjects, he speaks for me.” —Daniel Burke, RNS



**PAPAL DISAPPOINTMENT:** For hard-line Catholics, Pope Benedict XVI was not far enough to the right.



## Catholic hospital says fetus defense was 'morally wrong'

Legal advice trumped church teaching when a Catholic hospital in Colorado tried to defend itself in a wrongful death lawsuit by claiming that twin fetuses who died at the hospital in 2006, along with the mother, should not be considered persons.

After an uproar that prompted an investigation by Colorado bishops, the hospital apologized in early February and said attorneys for St. Thomas More Hospital in Cañon City were “morally wrong” to make that argument, even though state law does not consider a fetus a legal person.

In a statement, the hospital’s owner, Catholic Health Initiatives, reiterated its agreement with the state’s bishops and its “strict adherence” to church teaching “that every person is created in the image and likeness of God and that life begins at the moment of conception.”

At the same time, CHI argued—with support from Colorado’s hierarchy—that the mother and her unborn twin boys received “exceptional care” and that “nothing done by doctors, nurses and other staff members would have changed this horrible outcome.”

The lawsuit stemmed from a case on New Year’s Day 2006, when 31-year-old Lori Stodghill, who was 28 weeks pregnant with twins, was rushed to the emergency room of the hospital because of vomiting and shortness of breath. The woman suffered a heart attack in the lobby and died, the twins along with her.

Her husband, Jeremy Stodghill, sued but lost in two court rulings and has now petitioned to have the state’s supreme court hear his case.

The hospital’s lawyers initially argued that under the state’s Wrongful Death Act, fetuses are not considered legal persons and cannot sue.

“Although the argument was legally correct, recourse to an unjust law was morally wrong,” CHI said. It added that its lawyers will not use the Wrongful

Death Act in any future arguments, though the justices can cite the statute.

The Catholic bishops of Colorado—Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver, Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs and Bishop Fernando Isern of Pueblo—met with CHI officials and said they backed CHI’s statement. —RNS

## Fasting like Daniel gains a following during Lenten season

Amy Lester has followed Jesus for decades, but her keen appreciation of his sacrifice on the cross came only recently, when she started eating like the prophet Daniel.

From the start of Lent this year, the 40-year-old mother of two has kept a type of Daniel fast, which involves eating only food from seeds (vegetables, fruits, unleavened grains), drinking only water and practicing daily devotions.

A similar regimen kept Daniel and his friends free from corruption in King Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian court, according to the Bible. Now the Old Testament example guides growing numbers of Christians in the 40-day period of preparation for Easter.

“We set apart a sacrifice in Lent in order to identify, even the smallest [bit], with what Jesus sacrificed for us,” said Lester, who attends University Carillon United Methodist Church in Oviedo, Florida. “He died for me. The least I can do is to sacrifice the foods that are comforting to me.”

Devotees say the Daniel fast brings them closer to God by enhancing self-control, purging bad habits and improving health. It bears echoes of ancient tradition. Forgoing meat, dairy products and sweeteners for a season makes the Daniel fast resemble Orthodox Lent, which restricts consumption of meat, dairy and oils in the run-up to Easter.

Observers see benefits to linking Lenten spirituality with healthy eating in a nation that can afford to shed a few pounds. But some also worry about food

becoming a distraction or an obsession in a season of repentance and renewal.

“The problem with the Daniel fast is that the focus is on food,” said Dennis Dickerson, a Vanderbilt University professor and former historian for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. “Is there something else that you should deny yourself? In some ways, food is too easy because there may be something else that has a hold on you and is just as injurious as overeating.”

Though churches in the South started doing the Daniel fast more than a decade ago, the trend gained international momentum more recently with help from Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren in California. His similarly named Daniel Plan for weight loss is less rigorous than the Daniel fast since it allows for meat, but it nonetheless helped grow awareness that Daniel might have been onto something. It also helped Warren lose more than 60 pounds.

“I don’t think leaders have confidence that their members would take part if the pastor said, ‘I’d like us to do a [water-only] fast,’” said Kristen Feola, a former personal trainer and author of *The Ultimate Guide to the Daniel Fast*. “But a Daniel fast is a little less scary for people. More people are open to trying it because it’s such a unifying thing for a church.”

Prospective fasters have sought guidance in books, including Susan Gregory’s *The Daniel Fast*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies. Gregory says the two most common times to do the fast, which is normally 21 days but can be longer, are at the start of the New Year and during Lent.

“Too many do it at the beginning of the year because it’s easier as everyone wants to diet,” said 53-year-old Carolyn Scott, who lives near Naples, Florida. She plans to do it for Lent because that timing “makes the most sense.” In her view, it’s a discipline akin to Jesus’ fasting in the desert for 40 days.

For Scott, the hardest part will be going without bread, she said. She’s used to packing sandwiches for her teenage children’s lunches and will need to modify their diets as the family does the Daniel fast together.



Lester, in Oviedo, Florida, has a different strategy. She'll do the Daniel fast alone by day, then sometimes join her family in whatever they're having at night (except dessert). "It's less traumatic that way for my family," Lester said, noting that they get uneasy when everyone isn't eating the same food. "And [the fasting] is still a meaningful event."

In some cases, entire churches do the Daniel fast together during Lent. The idea strikes a chord in Methodist traditions, which trace their heritage to John Wesley, a proponent of fasting. Leaders in the African Methodist Episcopal Church have urged churchgoers to do the Daniel fast together, and congregations from Washington to Pennsylvania and Maryland have joined in.

For the fourth consecutive year, St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, is observing Lent with a churchwide Daniel fast. Young adults in the congregation tend to keep the fast more rigorously than older ones, according to Pastor Paul Milton.

But the fact that most members are making an effort simultaneously might help inspire those struggling with conditions such as diabetes and obesity, Milton said. "The ones we really need to help won't participate," he admits, "but we still try anyway." —G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS

## Publishers in 7th heaven with near-death memoirs

Do people really see a light at the end of a tunnel when they have a near-death experience? And could that be heaven up ahead?

That light is shining brighter than ever these days. Heaven is hot. Hotter even than that other place. Just ask any bookseller in America.

Folks have been going to heaven with amazing regularity lately. They look around—one even sat on Jesus' lap—then come back to report on the trip. It's a lucrative journey.

Three of these tales have ascended to heavenly heights on *USA Today's*

best-seller list recently, and more are on the way:

- Colton Burpo, then almost four years old, "dies" during an emergency appendectomy, travels to heaven and reports back how "really, really big God is." *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, Todd Burpo's 2010 tale of his son's round trip to the Pearly Gates, has sold more than 7.5 million copies after 22 printings. It has been on *USA Today's* best-seller list for 117 weeks and reached no. 1 eight times in 2011.

- Eben Alexander, a Harvard neurosurgeon who was in a coma for seven days in 2008, encounters an "angelic being" who guides him into the "deepest realms of superphysical existence." His *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, published last fall, peaked at no. 4 in December and is now no. 8.

- Mary Neal's *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again, a True Story*, published in May, tells of the orthopedic surgeon's celestial journey after a kayak accident in Chile in which she was pulled underwater for so long that even she thought she was dead. It has been in the top 150 for 33 weeks and reached as high as no. 14 in July.

Can you hear the publishing angels singing? "Once word of mouth took over, there was no stopping" the *Heaven Is for Real* phenomenon, said Matt Baugher, senior vice president and publisher at Thomas Nelson, Burpo's publisher. "That got people talking about heaven and their own experiences and opened up the door to other stories as well."

(A recent book in this genre, published in February, was written by longtime Episcopal priest John W. Price, a pastor of several parishes in Texas and London, England, and currently spiritual director at St. Luke's Hospital in Houston. His *Revealing Heaven: The Christian Case for Near-Death Experiences* was published by HarperOne, which says Price specializes in helping people understand the spiritual side of the reported phenomena.)

*Christianity Today* editor Mark Galli gave the phenomenon a serious look in December as the magazine's cover asked the question on many minds: "There and

Back Again: What are we to make of all those stories of visits to heaven?"

Neal, who says she was not particularly religious before her journey, says even she at first didn't have an answer to what happened.

"I didn't seek out people to talk to," she said. "I put everything on the back burner until the day that God threw me out of bed and said, 'OK, now is the time you are going to write this.' And from that point on, this has been an incredible lesson in obedience, because I said, 'OK. I'm doing it.'"

Alexander was a skeptic of such near-death experiences until he came out of his own coma in 2008 with a story to tell, which he shared with Oprah Winfrey at the end of last year. The trip, which he calls "a great and beautiful revelation," changed his life.

"What's most shocking is that I spent all these years not getting it," he said. "I had all the clues about the reality of this kind of thing, but science is mute on this issue. . . . What I bring to the table now is that I can help people with the [dying] process. That death is not the end, it's just a transition."

Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department of *Publishers Weekly*, is energized by these discussions. Not to be left behind, she even owns up to her own near-death experience 50 years ago. "But 50 years ago, you didn't talk about such a thing," she said. She acknowledges that now, at age 79, she may have missed her opportunity, although her doctor husband wasn't buying any of it at the time. And still doesn't.

"There's got to be an element of hope here," she said. "We want to hear from someone who has gone there, done that, seen it. That there is something beyond this life, which is miserable, even for those of us who are happy."

More than hope, she believes that buyers of these heaven-and-back books are just seeking "something reassuring."

Carol Fitzgerald, president of the online Book Report Network, agrees.

"In uncertain times, which is what we're experiencing now, people look for comfort," Fitzgerald said. "The concept that people have seen 'what's next' and shared what it's like gives hope and a feeling that life on earth is part of a journey with a greater reward." —Craig Wilson, *USA Today*



## Chicago is center for U.S. Muslim renaissance

Religious affiliation may be on the wane in America, a recent Pew study asserts, but you wouldn't know it from walking into the storefront near the corner of West 63rd Street and South Fairfield Avenue in Chicago.

Inside a former bank in a neighborhood afflicted with gang violence, failed businesses and empty lots, a team of volunteers drawn by their religious faith is working to make life better for Chicago's poorest residents.

The free medical clinic has expanded its hours; twentysomething college graduates are clamoring to get into its internship program; rap stars attend its alcohol-free poetry slams; and the budget has increased tenfold in the past decade.

The storefront belongs to Chicago's Inner-City Muslim Action Network, and it is part of a wave of new Muslim institutions emerging at an unprecedented pace. More than a quarter of the nation's 2,106 mosques were founded in the last decade, according to a recent University of Kentucky study, and new social service organizations, many of them run by twenty- and thirtysomething American-born Muslims, are thriving as never before.

This surge in new Muslim institutions, led by a nationwide network of young activists, "is the most important story in Islam in America right now," said Eboo Patel, founder of the college campus-based Interfaith Youth Core.

Young Muslims "are going about the process of institution building in concretely American ways," said Kambiz GhaneaBassiri of Reed College, author of *A History of Islam in America*, adding that the 9/11 terrorist attacks shaped a generation of young Muslim activists. "The sheer numbers are absolutely new, and the funding available for these organizations is absolutely new."

Chicago may be ground zero of this trend: the city's 15-year-old IMAN is one of several young Muslim organizations inspiring young Muslims to connect with their faith. "Charity is an important part

of our religion," said Adiba Khan, an IMAN staff member.

Other organizations include CAMP, the Council for the Advancement of Muslim Professionals; the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, which organizes the nation's largest political gathering of young Muslims at the Illinois state capitol each spring; and the Webb Foundation, dedicated to shaping a new model of diverse, indigenous American Islam.

A new campaign known as #MyJihad, in which American Muslims describe their personal faith struggles in ads on buses and in transit stations, got its start in Chicago before expanding to San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

"There are good things happening in many places, but Chicago seems to me to kind of have it all," said Jane I. Smith, who recently retired as a dean at Harvard Divinity School. "It's got all different backgrounds represented, and different ways of approaching Islam."

Chicago's Muslim community is among the nation's largest and most diverse. About 400,000 Muslims live in the Windy City, and the 15 new mosques built in the last decade are just one indication of wealth, growth and political connectedness. Smith sees signs of a kind of Muslim reformation here, not in any single watershed moment but in myriad

significant movements that are utterly new.

IMAN is run by Rami Nashashibi, a boyish-faced 40-year-old with a small black skullcap, a closely cropped beard and a gentle charisma. Nashashibi founded IMAN in 1997 with a group of friends eager to convince Muslim suburbanites that not only could they transform Chicago's worst neighborhoods, their faith demanded that they try.

Setting down roots in a Southwest Side neighborhood that saw 70 percent of its white population flee in the 1990s, the organization he founded helped ex-convicts find jobs and housing and hosted a series of poetry slams and urban street fairs aimed at connecting Muslims to the arts and social justice work.

IMAN also opened the city's first free medical clinic run by Muslims. The clinic boasts three exam centers, a lab, a growing cohort of young volunteer doctors and a full-time medical director.

Nashashibi—known as Rami to nearly everyone—grew up in Chicago and has a doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago. His dissertation focused on urban hip-hop culture, and he has the ability to connect with Hyde Park intellectuals, middle-aged suburban doctors, rabbis and neighborhood kids with just about equal ease.

Nashashibi enjoys near celebrity status among ethnically diverse cadres of young Muslims from California to London. IMAN's budget topped \$2.1 million last year, ten times what it was a decade ago.

"I think Rami is the most impressive Muslim of my generation," said Interfaith Youth Core's Patel.

Nashashibi's reputation extends far beyond Chicago. Inspired by IMAN's successes, young activists in cities including Detroit, Atlanta, New York City, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., have created similar ventures and turned to IMAN's staff for help.

U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison—a Democratic congressman from Minnesota and an African-American convert to Islam—is a Rami fan. "Quite honestly, the Muslims are very fragmented," Ellison said. "Rami doesn't care what color you are or what culture you are from. He wants to work with you." —Monique Parsons, RNS



RNS / MONIQUE PARSONS

**MUSLIM COMMUNITY OUTREACH:** *Rami Nashashibi founded IMAN in 1997 with a group of friends eager to convince Muslim suburbanites that not only could they transform Chicago's worst neighborhoods, their faith demanded that they try.*



## Scottish cardinal resigns after sex accusations

Cardinal Keith O'Brien of Scotland resigned on February 25 in the wake of explosive charges that he had made "inappropriate" sexual advances to four men, three of them priests and one now a former seminarian, starting in the 1980s.

O'Brien said he would skip the upcoming conclave to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI, leaving the United Kingdom without a cardinal's voice in the election of a new pope.

In a statement, O'Brien said Benedict had accepted his resignation effective immediately, and he appeared to allude to the events surrounding his sudden exit.

"Looking back over my years of ministry: For any good I have been able to do, I thank God. For any failures, I apologize to all whom I have offended," said the cardinal, who turns 75 in March, which is the mandatory retirement age for bishops. Cardinals retain the right to vote in a conclave until age 80.

The resignation added to the air of crisis and tumult that has surrounded the Vatican since Benedict earlier announced his intention to resign on February 28.

In the weeks since Benedict's announcement, the media have been filled with reports of infighting and scandals that allegedly drove the pope to step down; the latest revelation was a charge that Benedict recently learned of a number of gay churchmen in the Vatican who have allegedly been subject to blackmail. —RNS

## Canada names minister for religious freedom

After nearly two years of delay, Canada has finally named its ambassador for the Office of Religious Freedom. At a mosque north of Toronto, Prime Minister Stephen Harper named Andrew Bennett to head the office.

"Around the world, violations of religious freedom are widespread, and they are increasing," Harper said February 19 at

the Ahmadiyya Muslim community center and mosque in Vaughan, Ontario. "Dr. Bennett is a man of principle and deep convictions, and he will encourage the protection of religious minorities around the world so all can practice their faith without fear of violence and repression."

Bennett, a Catholic, is dean of Augustine College, a Christian liberal arts college in Ottawa.

Harper first promised to create an Office of Religious Freedom during his 2011 campaign. It will be part of the Foreign Affairs ministry and have an annual budget of \$5 million.

"This was a platform commitment, to create an office of religious freedom, to make the protection of religious freedom of vulnerable religious minorities a key pillar of Canadian foreign policy," said Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, who attended the announcement.

Critics have said the office is a misguided attempt to inject religion into foreign policy, and some have expressed concern that it would be biased in favor of Christians. —Ron Csillag, RNS

## Briefly noted

■ The U.S. is failing to pursue and prosecute clergy guilty of child sexual abuse, according to a recent United Nations committee report. In a little-noticed January 25 report, the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child urged the U.S. to "take all necessary measures to investigate all cases of sexual abuse of children whether single or on a massive and long-term scale, committed by clerics." David Clohessy, the director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, described national efforts to deal with child-molesting clergy as "woefully inadequate. There has been and continues to be too cozy a relationship between religious and governmental figures." Abuse cases are typically handled by local and state prosecutors, not the federal government.

■ Pakistan's only Anglican college, Edwardes College in Peshawar, has received a development grant equivalent to \$3.1 million from the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. James G.

Callaway, general secretary of the Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion, said the significant grant "recognizes the vital role our colleges are playing in non-Christian societies: modeling an embracing of diversity for the common good, which is part of the DNA of their Anglican identity." Edwardes is located in the troubled border region of northwestern Pakistan. The school's principal, Titus Presler, said, "It is heartening that this province in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has expressed such confidence in the higher education offered by a church institution. Lots of bad news comes from this area, but there is ground for hope."

## People

■ **Suzii Paynter** of Austin, Texas, was elected February 21 as the executive coordinator of the 1,800-church Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, succeeding Daniel Vestal, who retired last year as head of the fellowship, which formed in 1991 as an alternative to the increasingly conservative Southern Baptist Convention. The CBF Coordinating Council unanimously elected Paynter at a two-day meeting at First Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. Paynter currently works as director of both the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Advocacy Care Center of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. A pastor's wife and laywoman, Paynter was a member of the first CBF Coordinating Council and planner of the group's first General Assembly. "It just amazes me to stand here," said Paynter after her election.

■ **Amos Yong** was named dean of Regent University's School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia, effective February 15. Yong, who holds a Ph.D. from Boston University and is coeditor of *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, said in a statement that he hopes "to build on the achievements of two remarkable deans, Vinson Synan and Michael Palmer." A member of Regent's faculty since 2005, Yong said he is especially passionate about teaching biblical knowledge, interfaith dialogue, global Pentecostalism and political theology.



# LIVING BY The Word

*Sunday, March 24*

*Luke 19:28–40, Philippians 2:5–11, Luke 23:1–49*

**SOME PREACHERS** complain about the Palm Sunday lectionary, which puts together the “palm” and the “passion” Gospel texts. One complaint relates to dissonance: it’s not easy to pair a celebratory parade with a trial and execution. Another complaint concerns scope: there is too much theological ground to cover and too much liturgical time required.

If the service seems crowded and discordant, there’s a historical reason for it: the lectionary readings are a combination of two different local liturgies. The procession with palms comes from the church in Jerusalem, which has reenacted Jesus’ entry into the city with a full liturgical parade since at least the fourth century. The emphasis on the extended synoptic passion comes from the church in Rome, where the narrative has often been sung in three voices as the primary Gospel text on this day. The two traditions cross-pollinated and merged over the fourth through the eighth centuries. Thirteen centuries later we may still experience the dual influences on this liturgy as relatively unhomogenized. But the unresolved tensions have also proved to be theologically generative.

Many preachers point out that the crowds that praised Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem soon began lobbying angrily for his execution. The liturgy serves as an example of the transience of their as well as our own faith. With palm branches of hope still in our hands, we give up on the messianic vision, go back to business as usual and settle for Barabbas. It’s not only that our faith’s hopes wither away; sometimes we actively dismantle them. This interpretation emphasizes the dissonance within us: we who praise and follow Christ also abandon, betray, condemn and demonize Christ.

A less common observation is the dissonance this day ascribes to the divine. The text from Philippians distills the tension into what may be an early Christian creed or hymn. Christ Jesus, Paul writes, is in both the form of God and the form of a slave. It is in reverence for this apparent contradiction that everything “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” may find common purpose, culminating in what Paul envisions as a sort of cosmic liturgy in which everything everywhere bows before the mystery.

A recently composed hymn reads like a contemporary variation on the Christ hymn from Philippians. In Susan Briehl’s “Holy God, Holy and Glorious,” each stanza broadens into one of the unexpected dimensions of the holiness encountered in Jesus Christ. The third stanza draws on imagery of Isaiah’s suffering servant (part of which is read on this day): “You are despised, rejected; / Scorned, you hold us fast, / And we behold your beauty.”

The hymn invites us into a mysticism that keeps the contradictions taut. We praise the power of God by singing “you bend to us in weakness; / emptied, you draw near, / and we behold your power.” Another stanza praises God’s wisdom. By the end of the hymn we have beheld God’s glory, power, beauty, wisdom and life as they are incarnated in the one who lives and rides triumphantly toward what seems to be utter defeat and the cross.

Like the other Gospels, Luke includes the doubly ironic detail of Jesus being dressed in royal clothing as he is held and tortured. The hearers of the Gospels, however, perceive an irony the soldiers cannot see: the one mocked in the form of the slave is of a royalty greater and stranger than the soldiers can imagine. In the crucifixion narrative, all four Gospels encourage their hearers to perceive in the violent exercise of political power a hidden story of that power’s great failure and eventual undoing. Luke is in agreement with the other three Gospels: the merciful one is the mighty one. The one without the weapons holds the true power, and the one in the form of a slave is God. But only Luke, perhaps as a form of theologically charged gallows humor, records the absurdly dissonant line spoken by one condemned and dying man to another: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

A classic hymn sung on Palm Sunday is Theodulf of Orléans’s ninth-century poem “All Glory, Laud and Honor.” The text has little of the dissonance that marks the Christ hymn of Philippians or the suffering servant texts of Isaiah. Here children laud the advent of Christ and sing in praise of the Good King entering the holy city. (Gail Ramshaw recently quoted a little-used verse that generates a dissonance at the intersection of piety and comedy. Its literal translation is “We plead with Christ to ride on us, for we are only the ass walking into the holy city.”)

On Palm Sunday Christians around the world will sing Theodulf’s ancient hymn to Christ. They will welcome him with palms (or willow, olive or pine branches). Our liturgies today parade into a fertile theological tension: both Jerusalem and every local place are the holy city where Christ comes to establish his unlikely reign.

One final dissonance marks this hymn. Theodulf apparently composed this hymn to Christ the liberating king from a prison cell as he heard the Palm Sunday procession passing by. While some traditions suggest that he was released because his hymn was so well loved, it appears more likely that he died in prison, perhaps from poisoning. So the hymn we sing to the one who sets us free in some sense originates from a prison cell. With Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyred on this day in 1980, and with all those bound in prison, including ourselves in our own many captivities, we sing to the one who comes among us “to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.”



# Reflections on the lectionary

**Sunday, March 31**

**John 20:1–18**

**OVER THE PAST** 18 years my image of Easter has undergone a night-and-day change. I don't mean metaphorically; I mean that in my mind's eye Easter unfolds not in the daytime or at sunrise, but at night.

The curtain of darkness is described in John's Gospel: Mary discovers the empty tomb "early . . . while it was still dark." According to John, if one arrives for the sunrise service at the first Easter, it's already too late. However we may think about the resurrection, John has it taking place under the cover of night.

This darkness creates a hole, a gap in the Easter story where the crucial event takes place. The Gospels are silent as Christ rises like a thief in the night. In John, no well-informed angels rushed in to explain the missing body. When angels finally did appear, they had no answers but only a question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary had expected to find at least a corpse; instead she found a void, an opening in the darkness.

The Easter I grew up with was full of light, brass, banners and rows of people standing for one bold hymn after another. For the past 18 years, however, I've celebrated Easter under the cover of darkness at the Vigil of Easter, an ancient service now being recovered by denominations around the world. The experience of those years has given me images of resurrection that are like visions from a dream.

I helped seminary students learn to lead this service during a January-term travel seminar into a mountain wilderness. One night, in a meadow of deep snow out under the stars, we practiced the first ritual action of the Easter Vigil: lighting the new fire. Each student stomped down a patch of snow and set up a small tepee of kindling and split logs, then pulled apart raw cotton and placed it inside the set-up wood. In what looked like a lesson at Hogwarts, each student took a slab of magnesium and a knife, drew the backside of the knife hard against the mineral and began learning how to throw sparks into the tinder. As the students crouched over the wood, the sparks lit up the fog of their breath and flashed glimpses of their faces set in concentration or frustration. One by one the fires caught and glowed orange, red and yellow. The snow-filled meadow grew blooms of light and heat. Each student prayed a fire blessing over these fires struck from rock: "Bless this new fire, and increase in us a desire to shine forth with the brightness of

Christ's rising, until we feast at the banquet of eternal light" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship).

This 21st-century cohort of pastors-to-be needed no interpretive help in appreciating the significance of striking the Easter fire in the cold and dark of night.

At the Easter Vigil the mysteriously powerful—even dangerous—outdoor fire is ritually passed to the large paschal candle and carried inside to burn in the mostly darkened space while worship leaders read scriptural narratives. These ancient stories from Hebrew scripture—some congregations read as many as 12—speak of a God who acts in the world's nighttime. Under the cover of darkness, slaves cross rivers into freedom; dry bones rise up to live; the fiery furnace of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar goes dark; and long before any human eyes have opened, a blue-green world is given light and a sheltering dome of air, while the land, sea and sky are filled with fruitful creatures of every shape and kind. From the beginning, God has called new life out of darkness, often against great odds.

In the Gospel of John most of the action in the light of Easter day is made up of people literally running around trying to come to terms with what God has done in the night. God

## Ancient stories speak of a God who acts in the nighttime.

raises the dead before the world is fully awake to what is happening. We are caught off guard and struggle to catch up.

In the reckoning of time practiced in Judaism and inherited by Christianity, the new day begins not at a mathematically determined midnight or at the start of the human workday, but at sunset, as humans go to rest. As Dorothy Bass writes, this way of keeping time inaugurates each day with the fertile darkness of divine grace that renews the face of the earth in advance of our own efforts: "The first part of the day passes in darkness . . . but not in inactivity. God is out growing the crops even before the farmer is up and knitting together the wound before the clinic opens" (*Receiving the Day*).

Every year I see infants and adults baptized into this nighttime grace at the Easter Vigil. As they go down into the water under the cover of night, I am drawn into that holy, mysterious darkness too—and am caught off guard by the light and life that is rising there and in every night and valley of the shadow.

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*The author is Benjamin M. Stewart, who teaches worship and is dean of the chapel at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.*

# Why the cross?

by Charles Hefling

**SOME QUESTIONS** won't go away. It is an article of the Nicene Creed that the Lord Jesus Christ was "crucified for us under Pontius Pilate." What do the two little words *for us* mean? What good is the cross?

To ask that is to ask what is in technical parlance a soteriological question. But English-language theology has long used a good old English word as the comprehensive name for what the question is about: atonement. How atonement, or *the* atonement, can best be understood is thus a standard and convenient way to state the basic question in regard to Christ's suffering and death as beneficial.

It is a commonplace that no "orthodox" answer has ever been formally defined. Nor is there consensus. Gustaf Aulén famously distinguished what he called "three main types of the idea of the atonement," and others have offered similar typologies. But however they are categorized, explanations of the cross are not only different but disparate. That is why there is a question. Of the available positions, which one(s) should be taken seriously, taught, believed and preached?

The word *atonement* itself is no help. In a way it is part of the problem. On the one hand, we were all taught that it wears its meaning on its face: atonement is at-one-ment, reconciliation, in half as many syllables. That does seem to have been what the word was invented to mean. On the other hand, however, the verb *atone*, which came later, has veered off in another direction. No one ever translates 2 Corinthians 5:19 as "God was in Christ, atoning the world to himself." To atone is not to reconcile, either in everyday use or in theology. I atone *for* something, some failure of mine, some offense on my part; and my atoning consists in acting, or more especially suffering, so as to compensate for the wrongdoing. Consequently what is meant by *atonement* may be either of two things. It can mean being or coming to be at one—the original, etymological sense. It can mean leveling the score, redressing the balance, making reparation or restitution or the like—probably the more usual sense. The two meanings are not unrelated, and the distinction between them is often blurred, but to insist on it is by no means splitting hairs. For one way to sharpen the question at hand would be to ask: Does atonement depend on atonement? Otherwise stated, does reconciliation with God depend on compensating, making amends, paying a price? Is that what the cross is all about?

Aulén, for one, thought not. He maintained that atonement (that is, reconciliation) can best be conceived as the triumphant

outcome of confrontation and conflict, with Christ as the conquering hero. Hence the title of his book, *Christus Victor*. Enormously influential though the book has been, however, the stirring imagery of the *Christus Victor* motif has yet to reclaim the primacy it lost to the scholastic tradition inaugurated by Anselm, which still predominates in Western theology. It has been from this "Latin type" that the notion of atonement takes the meaning it commonly has in relation to the cross. The

**If the cross is God's punishment, then God is not just.**

default setting, as it were, continues to be that Christ's suffering atoned, compensated, made amends for human malfeasance—somehow.

The next question is how. There is a default setting for that too, although it has never gone unchallenged. In its most clear-cut form it usually goes by the name of substitutionary penal atonement. The straightforward logic of this account runs as follows. God is just. Justice, divine or human, requires that wrongdoers, whose wrongdoing makes them liable to punishment, should be punished. Humans, one and all, are sinners. As such they incur a penalty, which in justice ought to be paid and which has, in fact, been paid—not, however, by those who owe it and deserve to pay it, but by Jesus. The verdict never changed. Sinners are guilty. But because he died, the sentence has been suspended for everyone else. Instead of punishing, God pardons. That is the good news.

**T**here is much to be said for this traditional explanation. For one thing, it supplies a comprehensible link between Christ's suffering and a beneficial result, forgiveness, and so also between the gospel as a chronicle of past events and the gospel as *kerygma* here and now. For another thing, it gives God all the credit. My reprieve is none of my own doing; it is altogether an amazing, gracious gift. And for yet another and perhaps the most important thing, substitutionary penal atonement is not just conceivable but imaginable. It can

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give me what Newman would call a “real apprehension” of a tremendous boon for which I may be correspondingly grateful. The greater my conscientious dread of well-deserved punishment and the more vivid my experiential awareness of myself as a sinner, the greater the blessing of being assured that despite my guilt I shall not be given my just deserts.

That is why penal substitution preaches well: it speaks to the condition of the twice-born, to the sin-sick soul; and its speech is framed not in cool theological abstractions, which can give only “notional apprehension,” but in vivid, moving, affect-laden narrative images. Penal substitution may be a theory of atonement—an intelligible explanation, that is—but its appeal is not in the first instance intellectual. It is emotional, imaginative, existential. That being so, I can, as Newman says, “believe as though I saw.” I can picture Christ taking my place, enduring the pains I ought to have felt, and my imagination of how deeply he suffered brings home to me how great the penalty is that I have been spared. It is sometimes said that theology and spirituality have parted company. Not here.

Is the undeniable emotive power of this account enough to guarantee its truth? Newman held that there is no genuine belief without real apprehension. Even so, it does not follow that the criterion of credibility for a claim is whether it packs a visceral punch. I may be inclined to accept a statement because it engages my deepest desires and fears and yet discover that upon examination its implications are intellectually bogus or morally repulsive. The standard account of atonement, for all its affective effectiveness, might be like that—convincing, but only until you start to think about it.

There are, of course, serious objections to atonement conceived in terms of substituted punishment. All of them have been raised again and again, but it is worth rehearsing the main one. Recall the beginning of the argument summarized above: God is just. That sets the context for everything else, and the sequel makes it clear that by justice is meant, more specifically, *retributive* justice, which consists in attaching rewards to merit and penalties to fault. Now justice, so defined, is an

attribute of the God described all through the Bible. There can be no objection on that score. The problem, rather, is that penal substitution cannot be squeezed inside the same definition. To punish the guilty is just. They deserve it. The innocent do not. To punish them is not just; it is just outrageous. But Christ was innocent, tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). Nobody would deny that Pilate, Caiaphas and the rest acted unjustly; but if by doing what they did they were executing a divine plan—if God intended to punish his Son by their hands—then evidently God is not just after all.

From this internal contradiction there are two escape routes, one incredible, the other reprehensible. The first introduces the remarkable claim that Jesus *was* guilty, but only because the guilt of others was transferred from them to him. This expedient so undermines the very idea of moral responsibility that it would be better not to speak of justice at all. Guilt in the relevant sense is not the sort of thing that can be siphoned out of one person and into another. Nor is it any better to argue that punishing the innocent, though admittedly wrong as a rule, can in exceptional cases be just, provided it serves to “send a message” that dramatizes the heinousness of disobedience in order to deter those who might be inclined to disobey. There is a name for that: terrorism.

The point of these well-worn objections is that atonement, conceived in terms of penal substitution, cannot be conceived coherently. Much the same point has been made, in more robust fashion, by writers who declare that what Western tradition calls atonement is divine child abuse or the vengeful violence of a tyrannical God. Those are caricatures, which is not to say they are utterly mistaken. Retributive justice does leave something to be desired as an intelligible framework for making sense of the cross.

What it leaves out, above all, is a personal dimension. In the forensic context of strict retributive justice, rewards and punishments correspond to desert and nothing else. It does not matter who the deserver is. In the same context, being forgiv-



en is not a positive good; it is only a double negative. Punishment, by definition, takes away from an offender something valuable—liberty, physical well-being, companionship, possessions. Forgiveness would mean the remission or cancellation or cessation of (deserved) punishment. It comes down to taking away the taking away.

But a person is more than a party at law; and among persons forgiving is not reducible to omitting retribution. Forgiveness involves a change in both the forgiver and the forgiven—in their attitudes, their motivations, their selves. Enemies they were; friends they become, or become again. Hostile interaction gives way to concord. Such a reconciling shift in personal relations does not always happen, and when it does it is difficult, painful and costly—but not because suffering is an extrinsic preliminary condition that has to be met before forgiveness can occur, but because willingness to suffer is intrinsic to what forgiveness, in the personal sense, *is*.

Why so? Because, in the first place, evil is like the good it undoes in that it is infectious. It propagates itself. Suppose, then, that I have injured you. As a person, you are free to choose your response. If you choose to retaliate, you perpetuate the evil by causing a new injury. The choice may be wholly justifiable, but it is no less injurious for that. If instead you choose to hold a grudge, to brood on your injury and cultivate your dudgeon, you will still perpetuate the evil, internally, by diminishing yourself, souring your character and becoming your own victim as well as mine. On the other hand, if you choose to forgive, you are choosing to absorb the infection, as it were; to contain its self-diffusion, to forgo the gratifications of revenge, resentment, self-vindication and righteous indignation.

---

## Michelangelo, *Pietà*

Hewn from some polar  
air they make us breathe  
just to look on here,  
they appear doubles,  
Michelangelo,  
son, mother, one death,

Christ, his body bent,  
broken on her lap,  
stretches beyond pain.  
Mary, suffering  
His death till her own  
looks out, straight into us.

*Why did I bear him?  
How can this be mine?  
You who have come from  
where the living live,  
what do mothers do?*

Peter Cooley

tion. Furthermore, you are choosing to make your willingness known to me, to offer me your friendship, to accord me a status and value no less than yours, all without denying my offense or ceasing to be my victim. At the same time, conversely, until I have chosen to acknowledge you as such, to own the injury, ask for your benevolence and reciprocate your offer, the forgiveness that we must both choose if it is to occur has yet to be fully chosen.

**O**n this very abbreviated analysis, forgiveness is a matter of honesty, humility, communication and exchange, none of which takes place automatically or effortlessly, even for saints, much less for sinners. To forgive is not to forget, the adage notwithstanding. It is to remember. In the poet-theologian Charles Williams's words, to forgive is to know an offense as an occasion for joy, a *felix culpa*, a happy fault. Such an altered state of conscious engagement does not come with-

## The cross is an act—and an offer—of solidarity.

in the scope of justice in any ordinary sense. Even-handed justice responds to evil only with evil and only to good with good. Forgiveness responds to evil with good by transforming it, by willingly accepting diminishment so as not to prolong it, and by using it as a means of introducing a new good or restoring one that was wrecked.

In that regard, to return to the initial question, forgiveness would seem to be an instance, perhaps the defining instance, of a more general, more inclusive pattern. Its reversal of roles is not only a theme that runs through much of what Jesus is reported to have taught. Also, and most important here, it is enacted in the way he is reported to have met the final surge of hostility to that teaching and to himself. The hostility was probably inevitable; in that sense it was “necessary that the Christ should suffer” (Luke 24:26). But the necessity was not absolute. Things could have gone otherwise, to judge by the Gospels. Jesus could have chosen to flee, to fight arrest, to summon 12 legions of angels. All these he chose to refuse.

By so doing he chose to bear the cross, and his choice gave the bearing of it a meaning it would not otherwise have. Among thousands of Roman executions, this one is meaningful—not in the way a quantum of suffering might be meaningful, weighed in the scales of retributive justice, but meaningful as a communication, a word, an expression of willingness consistent with what Jesus had until then been expressing in deed and speech.

Has all this got anything to do with atonement? No. Not in the sense that because Christ accepted his suffering we do not have to suffer. It is the other way around. He accepted it because we do have to. His was a cross that had always been ours, the one way open to us, in a skewed world, for putting a stop to the consequences of our own malice without adding to them. Accepting that way, the way of the cross, was an act of



solidarity with us and an offer of solidarity with him—an appeal for us to follow him by willingly taking up whatever crosses the world imposes, by making them occasions for joy, by forgiving.

Any exposition of “crucified for us” along the lines drawn here is susceptible, so it seems, to criticism on the ground that it is an “exemplarist” or “moral influence” account, at best no different in principle from the one that got Abelard in trouble and at worst Pelagian. By this account, what Christ’s passion has done, the critic might object, is not a deed that we ourselves are incapable of doing; all it does is exemplify the principle that forgiveness is costly, that evil is to be met with peaceable resistance and that it is better to submit to wrong than to do it. It did not take the crucifixion of God to tell us that. Socrates said as much.

The charge of Pelagianism would stick if taking up our crosses instead of taking revenge were something we could do by ourselves, with enough effort. It is not. Nor is the life of self-donation portrayed in the Gospels an exemplar that is at all inviting or attractive to the self-regarding will to power with which it seems we are born. On the contrary. If it is true, as Christianity’s fiercest and most perceptive opponent maintained, that what is worth choosing above all else is heroic self-affirmation, then “God on the cross” can only be, as it was for Nietzsche, a ghastly negation of all that is best and noblest in humanity. Maybe that is hyperbole. Still, we are told it was Jesus’ own teaching that no one can come to him without being drawn by the Father who sent him (John 6:44), and the saying certainly suggests that it is not by unaided effort or instinct that anyone who comes to him does. The attraction, it would appear, is either unnatural or supernatural. So far, Nietzsche was right.

The point is worth a little elaboration. One of the peculiarities of Western Christianity has been a tendency to speak of God’s initiative in reconciling his human creatures as though it were entirely a matter of sending his Son into the world. But God’s Spirit too has been sent—and continues to be. On the well-founded assumption that this second divine initiative complements the incarnation, there is reason to suppose that part of the indwelling Spirit’s job description is to be the “drawing” that attracts self-sufficient persons to the self-emptying person of Christ. In other words, the motivation for choosing this exemplar is itself a gift, “the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us” (Rom. 5:5). It

would follow that reconciliation—atonement, if you like—can be understood as the action of a tri-personal God, rather than a transaction between the Father and the Son.

There remains the question of divine justice. It is a Pauline preoccupation, and the theology of penal substitution is more than anything else a cumulative attempt to systematize the unsystematic profundity of the letter to Romans. There Paul is obviously struggling to maintain that divine justice is retributive (the “wrath of God”) yet somehow also, in Christ, creative or transformative. In the tradition that began with Anselm, the struggle is resolved on the side of retribution. Arguably, though, it would be more authentically Pauline to resolve it, as Derek Flood has begun to do in *Healing the Gospel*, on the side of what he calls “restorative” justice. The distinction, roughly stated, is that punitive justice is concerned with what may be done to evildoers and restorative justice with what can be done about evil. Taken in this latter sense, justice as a divine attribute has its supreme embodiment in Christ’s acceptance of the cross. So and not otherwise is good brought out of evil—not even by God.

Presumably God has always been able to purge the world of its evils with an apocalyptic blast of power. Instead he has chosen to conform to the same justice he requires of his human creatures, to submit to the conditions of at-one-ment with them, to become all they are and are to be. And that is good news.

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# Staying power

by *Martin B. Copenhaver*

**I HAVE SERVED** as senior pastor at the same church for 18 years. The members of my congregation no longer ask how long I am going to stay, probably because they assume I will stay until I retire (which is a good thing because I assume that, too). Eighteen years is not exactly a towering pinnacle, but it does provide some interesting views. So much looks different from the time I first started.

After all, much has changed over the course of those years, not just in the congregation or in the surrounding culture but in how I see the congregation as well. When I preached my first sermon here at Wellesley 18 years ago I was overwhelmed by the sight of a largely anonymous sea of faces. Now, after so many years, there is hardly a trace of anonymity to be found. As I look out at that same congregation, I am still overwhelmed, but for an entirely different reason—now I see so much. I am overwhelmed by the familiar.

Now I see not just the faces, but faces over time. I see a face traced with grief, and I also see that same face from an earlier time when laugh lines spread like beams of light from the corners of his eyes. I see the young mother trying to keep her son still in the pew, and I also see her when she was a restless teenager herself. I see the potbellied man, and I also see him at an earlier stage when he was fit enough to run a marathon. These days, more often than not, I am confirming teenagers I baptized as infants or young children, which feels a bit like picking up a corner of time, peering inside and seeing it in all its dimensions.

I can even see people who are no longer there. When I stand in the pulpit and look out at my congregation, I can see the deceased husband of the woman who now comes to worship alone. I can see the man who somehow ended up with the church in the break-up with his partner, but I can see the now-absent partner as well. And there is a pew that may be full today but still seems somehow empty because the family that used to fill it has moved across the country. It is like what interpreters of art call *pentimento*—the reappearance in a painting of an underlying image that had been painted over. In a *pentimento* one can see both the old and the new somehow together and at the same time.

A pastor who is new to a congregation will not be able to see a *pentimento*. A new pastor is not able to see the older layers or the people who are no longer there. That kind of pastoral vision comes only over time.

The layering of time adds thick texture to both individual

narratives and the narrative of the congregation. After 18 years I not only know the back stories, I also know the back stories of the back stories. I know who has a difficult time getting along with whom. I can sense when a particular person is out of sorts, because I have seen her in enough contexts to be able to sort out the range of emotions reflected on her face. When one person says he is overwhelmed I know not to take it too seriously because he is often overwhelmed, and when another person says she is overwhelmed I take notice because this is something unusual for her.

## After many years I know the back stories of the back stories.

To be sure, after all this time a sense of been-there-done-that can creep into some of my pastoral duties. This year's stewardship campaign is numbingly similar to other campaigns. When writing my annual report, I am tempted to lift whole paragraphs from reports from previous years. And after 18 Christmas Eve sermons I have pretty much said all I know to say about the nativity. The congregation, however, becomes more interesting over time, much as a good novel becomes more interesting as each chapter nuances character development and plot in ways that are not possible in shorter literary forms.

**I** am convinced that the best preaching is done by pastors in their own congregations. That is because preaching is highly contextual. It benefits from deep and nuanced readings of three complex entities: the biblical text, the wider world and the congregation. The best preaching, in my experience, stands at the intersection of all three. A visiting preacher may be able to exegete the text and analyze what is going on in the world with brilliance, but an extra dimension is added when the preacher knows the congregation, particularly over a period of years. Harry Emerson Fosdick was fond of saying, "Preaching

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*Martin B. Copenhaver is senior pastor at Wellesley Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Massachusetts.*



is sometimes like trying to put drops into someone's eyes out of a ten-story window." Preaching to one's own congregation over time may not change Fosdick's image, but it shrinks the distance. When you know a congregation well, you feel like you are preaching at much closer range. The drops are more likely to find their target.

And, of course, after all of these years the congregation knows me well, too. They know my gifts and how those gifts can be put to optimal use. They also know what gifts I lack and have learned over time how others can help shore up my ministry where it is weakest. They can follow my train of thought, often arriving ahead of me, and they are tuned in to my sense of humor. They know a good deal about my passionate commitments, and they know all too much about my pet peeves.

Most important of all, over time my parishioners have learned they can trust me: I will listen without being judgmental; I will keep confidences; I won't bear grudges or play favorites; my judgment is largely sound; for the most part, I will not say or do something that is harmful to the congregation. Most pastors are trustworthy in these basic ways, but in congregations like the ones I have served, trust is earned over time, sometimes over many years, one pastoral engagement at a time.

When I first started at my church, I asked the moderator when the nominating committee was going to meet. He cleared his throat and said, "It is not our practice to have the pastors attend meetings of the nominating committee." He was gentle but firm. I was shocked. At other congregations I had served I not only attended the meetings of the nominating committee, I considered it one of my most important duties.

Fast forward 15 years: the chair of the nominating committee tells me about some of the challenges he faces in filling various positions. I respond, "How about if I come to one of your meetings? Perhaps I can help." He jumps on the offer, obviously thrilled that I would deign to attend such a meeting: "Oh, would you? That would be wonderful." I now have an open invitation.

When that kind of mutual understanding and trust exists between a pastor and congregation so much becomes possible. Like partners who have been dancing together for decades, they can anticipate each other's moves, which means that whomever is leading can use a lighter touch, more gentle and more graceful. In such instances, grace arises out of familiarity.

The affection I have for my parishioners has only grown over time. That

affection extends to those members of the congregation who can be quite difficult. If I were to encounter these individuals in another setting, I might not be as devoted to them, but there is something about being entrusted with the care of someone over time that can soften the heart. As a pastor, I can relate to Franklin Roosevelt's famous remark about Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza: "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." The word *but* may be the

## It's hard to say hard things to those you've come to love.

pivot point of that sentence, but it is the *our* that makes it possible.

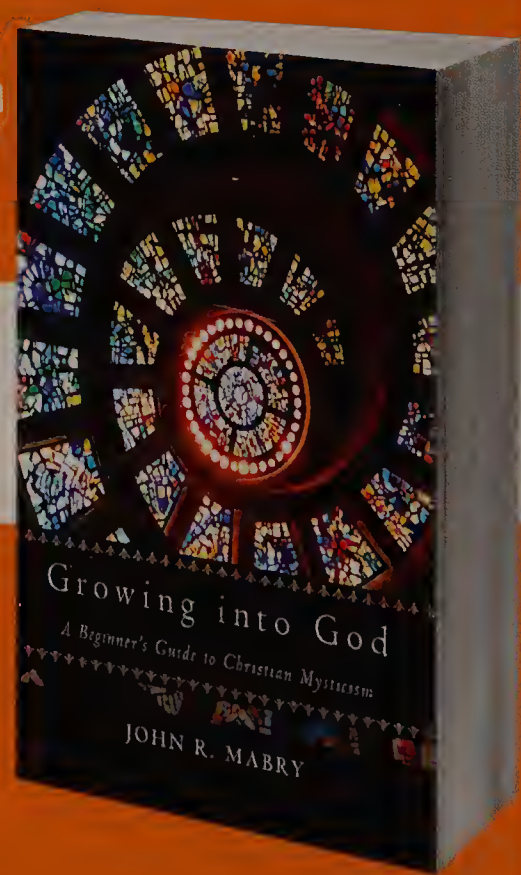
It is not all rosy, of course. There also is a sense of loss that can come with a longer pastorate. Each year beloved ones die. Parishioners move away or, what is often more painful, simply drift away. Then there are those who leave in a huff—they never got over what you said in a sermon or the fact that no one called when a parent died. These losses add up over a period of years. So these days, when I drive down the streets of our town, passing the homes of those who are or once were members of our church, it can feel like I am surveying a lifetime of

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relationships, many of which, for one reason or another, are no longer what they once were. This sense of loss is unique to the longer pastorate. Sometimes it is enough to make me long for a fresh start.

Eugene Peterson, who served one congregation for 29 years, is a big proponent of long pastorates: “The *norm* for pastoral work is stability. Twenty-, thirty-, and forty-year-long pastorates should be typical among us (as they once were) and not exceptional.” Drawing on the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, Peterson advocates, and for many years lived out, a “vow of stability,” which he summarizes in four words: “Stay where you are.”

Clearly, Peterson found his long pastorate generative, but I wonder if he is guilty of generalizing from his own experience. I have known pastors, even faithful and effective ones, who stayed too long in their churches. What began as generative and fruitful faded through the wear of time—not through laziness or boredom, but through something like an excess of comfort.

Such pastorates can be like the home a family has lived in for 25 years. Over the years it may have become more comfortable, but after a certain point it is less likely that the ragged carpet will be replaced or the paint will be freshened up. In fact, the need for such improvements might not even be seen by the family who lives there—ironically, because they have lived there so long, they may see less than a visitor will. The heart and mind have a way of making accommodations for the familiar.

As a young pastor, Reinhold Niebuhr confessed that he found the prophetic edge of his preaching softening—not because he feared criticism from his congregation, but because one shrinks from saying hard things to those you have come to love. In my experience, this dynamic only increases over time. It also goes in the other direction: over time pastors can have difficulty getting honest feedback, particularly when parish-

ioners feel somehow beholden to us for having been there for them at key life events.

**S**taying fresh in a long pastorate requires not only a willingness to change, but also a certain drive toward change. That change may come in the form of something like a new programmatic initiative, but for some the change can be as simple as moving some furniture. One pastor I know rearranges his office every year or two and has changed the location of his office three times. He swears that each time he has made such a move his perspective on ministry has been enhanced. People often decry “change for change’s sake,” but I am beginning to think there is something to be said for it.

Inevitably, the mere passage of time brings about its own changes. I am not the pastor I was when I started in this con-

## Sometimes pastors can get too comfortable in their congregations.

gregation. When I first arrived I was younger than most in the congregation. Now I am older than the average parishioner. What has changed is not only the number of gray hairs on my head. Just by virtue of my getting older my role in the congregation changes as well. A friend who has served one congregation for many years reflects, “When I came here I was the young guy—and then I wasn’t. I knew suddenly that what this congregation really needed was a sage, and I couldn’t even say the word without giggling, let alone imagine ever applying it to myself. But I knew that to be faithful I had to grow up or get out.”

I find it particularly chastening to recognize that I have known pastors, even savvy ones, who do not see when it is time to leave. They could spot such a time in another pastor’s life from a hundred paces, but not in their own. Knowing when it is a good and appropriate time to leave is more art than science, of course, but that may be just another way of saying that it is difficult to know.

The challenge can be complicated by economic considerations. Many pastors are retiring later these days. Is that because they continue to be effective at a later age or because their pensions took a hit during the recent economic crash and they cannot afford to retire? So many factors influence our thinking, and we are not always able to sort them out on our own.

In my own setting, I have toyed with the idea of giving one or two trusted members a poison pill, so they could slip it to me when they sense I have stayed too long. As a congregation we practice communal discernment with every manner of decision before us. We are particularly intentional in our discernment about important matters. So it is interesting that I find it hard to imagine how to engage the congregation appropriately in

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## Cricket song

My head clangs, my skin congeals  
when I imagine your final terrain:  
the moldering gloom of the cave,  
giant stone corking the mouth  
to seal your body in—  
you bid me to imitate you, even in this?  
Until you rise, Love, I am useless.  
Stretching in a long  
rectangle of wall-shade,  
I pretend my hand crumbles  
dank sepulchral dirt. Listen.  
In the corner, one cricket abides.  
Soft-shelled and tooth-white,  
he chirrs his dwarfed wings,  
persistent song his answer  
to the absence of light.

William Kelley Woolfitt



communal discernment with a question as important as, How long should I stay on as pastor?

**S**o I am left largely to my own perceptions, as well as the counsel of friends and family. I have learned a few things by observing other pastors. Clearly, a severe loss of energy is a sign that one should leave, but noting where a pastor's energies are deployed can be telling as well. Most of us lose energy for routine eventually, but if there is a lack of energy for anything new, that is a sign that one has stayed too long. Some pastors devote more and more energy to commitments outside their congregations—to church-related organizations and social service organizations, for example—and that can be a sign, too.

I have noticed that some pastors, the longer they stay, make more references to the past than to the future of their congregations, and that seems telling.

I would also add that a telltale sign a pastor has been in a congregation too long is when he or she makes frequent reference to how long they have been there. I am hesitant to add that because, increasingly, it describes me.

Before we can fully assess the benefits of a long-term pastorate, it is necessary to consider what happens after a long-term pastor leaves. Successors of long-term pastors often struggle, many remaining only for a few years.

There are various reasons why this is so often the case. After

so many years, parishioners can have a hard time transferring their loyalty. Also, without anyone intending it, over time a pastor's approach to ministry begins to be assumed as normative, as if it is the only way to do things, and the successor can seem guilty of diverting from that norm. This dynamic is all the more pronounced with a long pastorate.

Whatever the reasons, the experience of so many who follow long-term pastorates should give us pause. It may not be possible to know if a pastor has stayed too long until a number of years after that pastor has left. It may be only then that anyone can know if the long-term pastorate equipped the congregation to thrive after the long-term pastor leaves.

In the meantime, a mother tells me I cannot possibly retire because ever since her three daughters were little they envisioned me officiating at their weddings. Another parishioner hands me plans for her memorial service. Although she is in good health, she assumes that I will be there to carry out these plans. Those kinds of encounters are happening more frequently these days.

So I remind myself that Paul planted, Apollos watered and the rest of us are just passing through. In the church, none of us pastors are indispensable. That is a good thing because, in the larger scheme of things, none of us will remain for long. Only Jesus is indispensable.

But even knowing that is not always enough. I can't help but wonder: Who will do that parishioner's memorial service? **CC**

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## CASE BY CASE

# Paper chase

**BEING A SENIOR PASTOR** seemed to come naturally to Larry. He had grown up working in his parents' business after school and during summer vacations, and he had seen his parents deal effectively with employees in many kinds of situations. When he went away to college and took some management courses, he discovered that his parents had intuitively been applying several management theories, especially those that called for helping employees enjoy their work and expand their capabilities.

When he went to seminary, he discovered some other ways of looking at how his parents had dealt with employees: he found theological language about empowerment and treating others as one might treat Christ. He had come to see one task of a senior pastor as helping the members of his staff to grow spiritually and to learn to answer more fully the call of God upon their lives.

Not surprisingly, Larry's staff worked well together, and their congregation was growing steadily. The new associate pastor, Stephanie, was relatively young herself and quite enthusiastic about her new position, which focused on children and youth. In her first six months, the youth group gained several new members and became a more visible and active part of the church.

At a staff retreat in January, Larry and the staff picked out several Sundays for special churchwide emphasis in the coming year. One of them was the Sunday in April nearest Earth Day. Stephanie was excited about that choice because she was convinced that every age group among the children and youth could participate in some appropriate way.

Larry had always avoided micromanagement, and it never occurred to him to ask Stephanie for a complete rundown on what she planned to do with every single age group. He learned by reading the draft of the April newsletter that the senior high youth were going to observe Earth Day and celebrate the gift of God's good creation by washing dishes. Specifically, they were going to wash the dishes that they hoped the adults would use instead of paper plates and cups for the coffee time that preceded the 11 o'clock worship each week. They planned to continue the project through the

Sundays in April and May and then decide whether they would extend it into the summer.

"Hm," Larry thought, "that sounds like a lot of work. I hope Stephanie doesn't wind up doing the dishwashing herself, and I'll bet they don't carry on through the summer. But it's a great idea, and it's certainly in tune with the resolution we passed at our regional conference last year to ask our conference center to avoid using paper tableware. We'll just see how it goes."

Ten days later, four days after the newsletter had been mailed out, Larry got a call from Stan Mitchell, a parishioner in his late sixties who made one of the larger financial pledges each year and faithfully fulfilled the obligation. Stan asked to see Larry,

and they set up an appointment for that afternoon. Larry found himself wondering several times what Stan wanted to see him about; he was not the sort of person Larry expected to ask for counsel or help with a problem. It crossed Larry's mind that since Stan was a former executive who had retired a year or so ago, he might be thinking about estate planning and want some advice about making a gift to the church. Larry was always mildly uncomfortable discussing money, but he steeled himself to be ready if that was the conversation Stan had in mind.

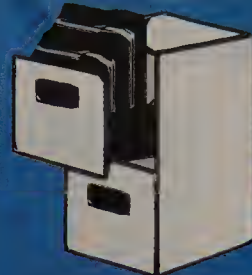
He found himself watching for Stan's arrival, and when he saw Stan's BMW enter the parking lot, he went to the door to greet him. "How's retirement?" he inquired, and was surprised to hear Stan's answer that it was not necessarily all it was cracked up to be. As Larry listened, he thought he detected an undertone of boredom in Stan's description of his new life. After a while, he asked what in particular Stan had wanted to discuss with him.

Though he thought he was prepared for whatever Stan might say, Larry was shocked to hear him speak angrily about the youth group's Earth Day project. Within a few sentences, he made it clear that he considered the project a personal insult to him and his former occupation.

"Stan," said Larry, "I'm sorry you're upset. I need a little help, though, in understanding how you feel this relates to your career. The paper company you worked for produces card-

**Unexpectedly, the youth group's Earth Day project came under attack.**





board containers, doesn't it? I had never heard that it makes paper plates and cups, too!"

"It doesn't," Stan replied, "but that's beside the point. What the church is saying is that people who make paper are bad. She's making me feel like my whole life was a sinful waste. It wasn't! I've done lots of good things for this church that ought to be appreciated."

"She?" Larry asked, fearing he knew the answer.

"That new youth minister," Stan said. "She's stirred the young folks up about this. There are plenty of us in this town and in this church who've made our livings making paper. Who is she to condemn us?"

"Uh, I don't think that's what she had in mind at all," Larry said. "And if you didn't make paper plates and cups, I'm not sure why you're feeling that this is aimed at you personally."

"Paper is paper," Stan said firmly, "and sin is sin. You had better stop her before she runs me off and everybody else who's had to work for a living. Somebody has to pay the bills around here." Looking at his watch, he stood up and said, "I've got to go. I have to pick up my wife at the hairdresser. She wants me to go with her to pick out a lamp. She's been buying lamps without me for 44 years, and I don't see why I have to get involved now."

"Stan, could we talk some more about this tomorrow or the next day?" Larry asked. "I see that you feel very strongly about this, but I'm not sure I understand all I need to about your objection to the project."

Stan made an appointment to return to see Larry in two days. When he left the office, Larry just sat there, wondering, "How could I have been so wrong about why Stan was coming in? What will I say to him day after tomorrow? And I better talk to Stephanie today."

## A response by M. Craig Barnes

Conflict is neither good nor bad. It is just inevitable, and it's another tool for leadership. Jesus Christ started most of the ones he experienced, so why should his faithful disciples expect to avoid them? The challenge for a leader of Christ's church is to make a conflict redemptive.

Larry likes to think of himself as a pastor devoted to "empowerment." That sounds good these days. For a long time we have chaffed at the old hierarchical, top-down forms of organizational leadership. We now expect enlightened pastors to free the gifts and passions of their parishioners, and we assume that the Holy Spirit will use all of this energy to build up the church into a harmonious whole. But there is little biblical warrant to support such a naïve assumption.

We first meet the Spirit, or holy *ruach* of God, in the opening verses of the Bible when a great heavenly wind moved over the waters, shoving the dark chaos aside to create light and beauty in its place. When Jesus presented his credentials for ministry, he claimed that this same Spirit had anointed him to preach good news to the poor, which was a way of again shoving aside the chaotic world order created by the rich. After

Jesus' ascension, the Spirit enflamed Jesus' disciples with a passion for the gospel at Pentecost, and the scene was anything but controlled and orderly. And then these disciples, who were now apostles, began a missionary enterprise that was "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Apparently, the Holy Spirit finds chaos and conflict to be a preferred working environment.

So the mission of the pastor is not to avoid conflict but to look for the ways that the Holy Spirit is at work within it. Frequently, the empowering pastor is using a faddish job description to avoid needed conflicts in the church or to blame them on a creative associate pastor or elder. But even if Larry succeeded in relieving the tensions of inevitable conflicts for a while, it would only be a futile effort to push away the Holy Spirit. The conflicts would still occur. That's because God will not abandon the church to our management strategies.

In order for a conflict to be redemptive within the congregation, it is helpful if the pastor has at least a hunch about the real issue. It would be easy if Stan's real angst had anything to do with what a young pastor thinks about the paper industry, but that is doubtful. Had the Earth Day project of washing dishes at the church occurred when Stan was still in a management position in the industry, I doubt that he would have given it little more than a dismissive smile and then returned to his busy schedule.

Stan's real conflict these days is that he no longer has a busy schedule that he deems worthy of his expertise. A man who used to direct decisions that involved millions of dollars is now having to hurry to pick up his wife from the hairdresser in order to help her buy a lamp. It takes a heroic effort for Stan to admit that his importance is not tied to being a manager of industry; it takes a heroic effort to admit that in the course of his entire marriage he never did anything more important than be by the side of his wife when she picked out a new lamp for their home. If Stan is going to rise to such heroism, the Holy Spirit is going to have to move over the chaos of his retirement.

The real job of Stan's pastors is to help him see the holiness of his ordinary routines. The most confessional thing Stan told Larry was not his objection to the Earth Day project, but his expression of frustration that his job in life is now picking up his wife from the hairdresser and then helping her furnish their house.

The reality is that such domestic homebuilding work was always far more important than anything he ever did for the corporation that made cardboard boxes. We all live with many callings in life, and the way we make our money is hardly the highest one.

Stan was created to glorify and enjoy God. His inability to find a cause worthy of his résumé after retirement, and the silly conflict he's trying to create over the youth group project, indi-

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*M. Craig Barnes is president of Princeton Theological Seminary. The narrative case was developed by Ellen Blue, who teaches at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa. It first appeared in *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* and is used here by permission of Abingdon Press.*



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cate that he is flailing about. He's trying to find a calling worthy of his life, a calling from which he'll never have to retire.

The last thing that will be helpful for Stan is for his pastor to become fearfully reactive and put the breaks on Stephanie's creative work in the church. What Stan needs from both Larry and Stephanie are pastors who have aspirations for his life with God—and higher aspirations for their own work than servicing complaints.

So what does Pastor Larry say to Stan at their next appointment? My suggestion is that he start by letting Stan ramble on a bit more about the Earth Day project. Not only should Larry not be defensive, he should also occasionally nod to indicate that he understands the complaint. But when the time is right, Larry should pause, lean forward and gently change the subject by saying something like, "You seemed upset a couple of days ago when you had to run out to help your wife buy a lamp. Tell me some more about that." The chances are great that Stan will then reveal his real anxiety.

And what does Larry say to the young associate pastor to encourage her ministry after it has come under attack? He can explain the difference between texts and subtexts, and he should note that Stan's real issue has nothing to do with her project. But that's not hard. The more difficult thing Larry has to tell her is: "Welcome to church ministry. There's always messy chaos here, and apparently that's how the Holy Spirit likes it."

CC

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by Samuel Wells

## Night out in London

**I CAME TO** St. Martin-in-the-Fields last July. It's a complex organization; to get to know it I've spent time as a concert usher, a sous-chef, a bookstall volunteer and an aide in the day center for homeless and vulnerable people. I spent a half hour each with 50 staff, church members and neighbors, and I even turned out for the cricket team. This is England, after all. So it made sense to spend a night outside.

In the U.S., people who know the name St. Martin-in-the-Fields think of it as an orchestra. When I was appointed as vicar here countless American friends congratulated me on taking over the world-famous academy—and were impressed I'd hitherto kept my musical prowess so quiet. In the U.K., by contrast, people assume St. Martin's is a homeless shelter. Since 1927 the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields has gone on BBC Radio every December and made an appeal for supporting the ministry to homeless people; this year it brought in a record \$3.25 million. It's not unusual to overhear this conversation in Trafalgar Square: "That's a beautiful church, and such a great location." "It used to be a church—they turned it into a homeless center." The congregation members don't know whether to feel proud or exasperated.

I had two companions for my night on the streets. One was an overseas national whom I'll call Tugo; he'd been in this country for a long time but had no prospect of getting citizenship. I know Tugo because when I or one of my colleagues open the church at 7:30 a.m. each day, a dozen or more foreign nationals follow us in to find warmth and shelter and hover around during morning prayer like a cloud of witnesses. They remind me that we're all homeless, really: we have no abiding city. Tugo is sometimes among them. His friend, whom I'll call Becky, has a different story: orphaned when young, she'd come to London years ago to trust her own wits more than the unreliable attention of her siblings.

Tugo and Becky wanted to know why I was doing this. Was it some kind of publicity thing? Was I checking up on them in some way? I said, "There's a story in the Bible. Jesus says if you want to meet him, then hang out with people who are hungry and naked and have nowhere to go." "I'm not naked," said Becky, adding, "Don't get fresh with me." I said, "I think he meant that we all put barriers between ourselves and God, but people like you, you don't have as many barriers, so when I look at you like I'm doing now, I can see Jesus—I see Jesus through you." "But I'm a Muslim," retorted Tugo—half challenging, half pondering. I replied, "I think that's probably Jesus' sense of humor."

It broke the ice. Tugo took me on the rounds. We went to the coffee bar where he knows he'll be offered a spare muffin; to the burger store where they'll give him hot water for tea; to the hot dog stand where there's a chance of a sausage and a chat. He looked scornfully at the place where a mobile soup kitchen shows up: "Them people do more harm than good—look at the fights breaking out over there as they dole out the food. I don't take handouts, me." It seemed an ironic statement after the activity of the previous half hour, but I could see what he meant: all of Tugo's transactions depended on and deepened genuine relationships. He wouldn't accept food from a stranger who was salving his or her conscience.

Later we picked up Tugo's sleeping bag from a store where he protected the owner from the predations of other street people. We picked up some cardboard (for a mattress) from a stationer who was a bit casual about recycling. We did our nighttime ablutions in a hotel where the receptionist liked

### My homeless companions asked if I was checking up on them.

Tugo's jokes and cheerful company. I was a student—and these two strangers and pilgrims were giving me quite an education.

We bedded down in a carefully selected spot, sheltered from wind and rain but not from a piercing security light. I didn't sleep much: I got used to the cold but not to the drunken noises and the feel of boots brushing past us. Becky and Tugo had plenty of stories about being kicked and punched.

For my two companions, the best thing about the homeless center wasn't the medical treatment, the showers, the food or the employment advice. It was the chance to meet people like themselves. Salvation doesn't lie in programs or resources; it lies in friends. My night out was the same; the best part was getting to know my two new friends.

They refused my offer to take them out to breakfast. As I headed back to my apartment, Becky said playfully, "Did we show you Jesus then?" "Yes," I said, "I think you did."

"Do us a favor," Becky said. "If we do this again—let's make it in the summer, hey?"

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*Samuel Wells is vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London. This column is his first as a Faith Matters contributor.*



# IN Review

## Evangelical and gay

by Lillian Daniel

**R**aised a Southern Baptist, with two loving parents, Justin Lee didn't want to be gay. But when he revealed that he was attracted only to people of his own gender, the church he loved acted like he had chosen to be that way. When he searched for understanding in high school and college, he was essentially told to cut it out and stop being gay, with Jesus' help.

At the advice of his pastor, Lee threw himself as a teenager into the ex-gay movement. He listened to national speakers testify about having turned their sexuality around with Jesus' help. But away from the speaker's podium, the ex-gays told him a different story. Their behavior had changed but the attractions remained. Whether or not they were truly ex-gay depended on the definition of what makes someone gay—the inclination or the act.

This distinction would later become a linchpin in Lee's work with the LGBT Christian community; it is something that sets him apart in a noisy and crowded battlefield.

At his conservative Christian university, Lee joined a campus ministry group, hoping that it would be a safe place to connect with God and share his inner life with the church. He also joined the gay students group, whose numbers increased with his enthusiastic involvement. But as a gay Christian who was not sexually active, he felt alone in both groups, unable to be himself.

When he was with the Christians, he worried about being gay. When he was with the LGBT crowd, he worried about not being gay enough. Apparently it was not easy to be a nondancing, nondrinking, young gay Christian who was willing to

wait to have sex but unwilling to deny wanting it.

In this book for our age, the Internet plays a key role. It was through chat rooms, e-mails and blogs that the Gay Christian Network—which Lee leads—was born. The Internet is also where Lee found community, both loving and hurtful. In one heart-wrenching story, he describes being abruptly banned from his favorite Christian Internet chat room simply for being gay. Left with no way to communicate with the confidants he had met online, he fell into despair.

Lee is beyond charitable throughout this work. He's written a book that your Southern Baptist grandmother could read and then sigh at the end, "Well, bless his sweet heart." Careful to throw in plenty of good-natured comments like, "I am sure they meant well," he often writes like the scrupulous "God boy" he wanted to be as a child. But the stories speak for themselves. By the time he tells us that Christians, not gays, are destroying the church, we have enough evidence to convict.

But I didn't need Lee to get me riled up or to tell me that the ex-gay movement doesn't work. I pastor a relatively liberal church in the middle of the conservative western suburbs of Chicago, where dreams of megachurches dominate the ecclesiastical imagination. On the cover of each Sunday worship bulletin, my congregation welcomes everyone, with a specific reference to sexual orientation. We do that because we are surrounded by churches that claim to welcome everyone but then lead gay people to the ex-gay movement, which offers bad therapy at best and soul-scathing injury at worst. Sometimes those refugees

limp into our church. But more often, they end up nowhere.

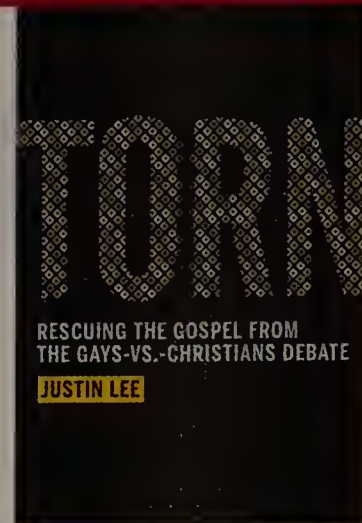
So in the liberal Protestant waters in which I swim, it is not uncommon to hear this plaintive question, asked with a sigh and perhaps also a touch of condescension, "Why don't they just come to our churches instead?"

Why don't they come to my church? We'll perform a gay marriage. In Illinois we can't yet make it legal, but not for lack of trying. Our children take it for granted that every church welcomes gay people, until they hit prejudice in schools and playgrounds, and they realize that ours is the minority opinion within Christianity. But the teenagers are proud of our countercultural stance in conservative DuPage County. As one snarky senior high fellowship member put it, "Our church put the *bi* in Bible."

Having never been a member of a conservative church, I scratch my head at the gullibility of Christians who line up to hear the next ex-gay phenom doing victory laps on the Christian speaking circuit, touting how he's changed. I marvel at these guys' ability to reproduce themselves each time another speaker gets caught with his pants down. But my world is not Lee's world.

And Lee loves his church. So much that he wants to change it.

His memoir makes it clear that he delights in praise songs and evangelical



### **Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate**

By Justin Lee  
Jericho Books, 272 pp., \$21.99



worship. He is no fan of the ultra-open churches, which he characterizes as light on doctrine and too quick to sacrifice a relationship with Jesus on the altar of inoffensiveness. That's not how I would describe my church, but I do understand the ways in which people love the worship practices that have shaped them, even when they have been hurt.

Having experienced prejudice in the evangelical world, Lee is still passionate about its many strengths. And it's that evangelical world he seems to be talking to the most in *Torn*. At first, this book seems to be aimed at LGBT evangelical Christians, but by the end it feels like it was written more for their parents, their grandparents and, most of all, their pastors.

Because of that, the book has a sweet tone. Lee bends over backward not to shock or to be strident. His prose on the subject of sexual attraction is so wholesome you could read it with a glass of milk and cookies while listening to Karen Carpenter sing "Close to You." He lays out his dream of lifelong companionship so tenderly you'd think he was a middle-aged marriage enrichment leader instead of the college boy of the story. I have to admit, I kept wondering if the kid was ever going to get to have sex.

But Lee came early to a mature understanding that eludes the average college student: sexuality is so much more than the sexual act. His exploration of celibacy (his own in college and that of other adults he knows now) is respectful and serious, and it comes out of his evangelical tradition.

Lee is a spiritual leader who makes a compelling case for setting aside the language of the culture wars. He is determined to keep two key groups of Christians within the Gay Christian Network by avoiding polarizing terms. One group, which he calls "side A," is composed of people open to being in gay sexual relationships and the other, "side B," of people who are gay but choose to remain celibate. Surely I am not the first to note that side A gets a much better grade than side B when it comes to matching principle and practice. But Lee's desire to keep these two groups in conversation sets his project apart from

others, as does his consistently gentlemanly tone.

His gentle analysis convicted me—a reader from outside his tradition and another sinner prone to smugness. I recall with some chagrin a conversation I once had with a Catholic feminist nun I worked with on social justice issues. As we grew closer, she told me she was gay, which I immediately interpreted to mean she had a partner. After all, why else would she tell me? When I said something that revealed my assumption, she was clearly offended. She took her celibacy seriously, even if I had not. I now see that she was a side B Christian. And I was a liberal Protestant who didn't get it.

The beauty of this book is that Lee wants to challenge all kinds of Christians on the ways we don't get it. It's not enough for liberals to sit comfortably in their own little swimming pools and say, "Come on over and jump in! The water's fine." And it's not enough for evangelicals to throw up their hands and say to their gay members, "Love the sinner, hate the sin. If you don't like it, go somewhere else." It's not enough for openly gay Christians to rejoice in their relationships and see everyone else as repressed. And it's not enough for celibate gay Christians to see themselves as more pure.

These self-righteous polarities are not working for us, in the church or outside it. Hence, Lee's conciliatory and generous tone.

But if it were not for the battles waged thus far, would there even be room in our culture for a gracious book like this? In last year's election more states legalized gay marriage. Public opinion is turning, even in the evangelical church of Lee's upbringing. None of that happened by accident.

*Torn*, with its gentle tone, would calm troubled waters that have been troubled for good reason. Perhaps it is because of so many fights hard won that Lee is now able to move into more nuanced territory with this gracious and grace-filled memoir.

*Lillian Daniel is senior pastor at First Congregational Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and author of When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough.*



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## Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude

By Joerg Rieger and  
Kwok Pui-lan  
Rowman and Littlefield,  
164 pp., \$39.00

It is easy to conclude that the Occupy movement was a flash in the pan, enacted by disgruntled people without a plan or staying power, a passing whim to be forgotten. This book insists otherwise. Its authors are peculiarly equipped to make the argument. Joerg Rieger, professor of theology at Southern Methodist University, has produced a series of important studies on the role of empire in the imagination and interpretation of the Western theological tradition. Kwok Pui-lan, professor of theology and spirituality at Episcopal Divinity School, is at the forefront of a postcolonial hermeneutics that both exposes the hegemony of empire and thinks outside that hegemony for alternative possibilities. These authors are of immense importance and are not as well known as they deserve to be.

Two political theorists, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, have produced a series of very serious books on the current political environment on a global scale. In 2000 they published *Empire*, a study of the hegemony of imperial ideology. As a counterpoint, in 2005 they published *Multitude: War and*

*Democracy in the Age of Empire*. These two massive studies together offer a map of social power and social possibility. It is easy to transpose the juxtaposition of the empire and the multitude onto the 1 percent and the 99 percent. Hardt and Negri present people's action as a counterforce to empire for the sake of democracy.

I linger over Hardt and Negri because Rieger and Kwok have taken up their argument, as is indicated in their book's subtitle, *Theology of the Multitude*. They use the notion of multitude to refer to the Occupy movement as a particular instance of a political force outside of and over against the 1 percent of empire. And they take the Occupy movement and its 99 percent as both an embodiment of and a metaphor for the political possibility of a democratic enterprise.

Rieger and Kwok situate the Occupy movement in a global context and subject the movement and its resisters to acute theological commentary. Their theological appeal is rooted in two terms in the Greek New Testament: *ochlos* ("mass of people") and *laos* ("common people"). One can observe empire and multitude in Luke's articulation of a map of contested social power:

Every day [Jesus] was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people (*laos*) kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they

could do, for all the people (*laos*) were spellbound by what they heard. (Luke 19:47–48)

Two accent points in the argument of the book merit sustained attention. First, these authors are clear that the empire-multitude juxtaposition is evidence of a class struggle that reflects an acute social, political and economic dichotomy. They characterize the empire as the "transnational capitalist class" that manages the military, controls natural resources and moves money around with ease and agility. The ideology of U.S. exceptionalism serves these powerful elites who stay focused on the control of oil production and protection. The counterpoint is the working class that supplies the cannon fodder and cheap labor that sustains the wealth and ease of the elites. The 1 percent specializes in uniformity of economic theory, uniformity of patriotic mantras and uniformity of religious orthodoxy.

The point about class is important on two counts. First, in "polite society" (meaning the society of the 1 percent) it is impolite and impolitic to introduce the category of class because the 1 percent insists on an ersatz social solidarity that keeps class hidden. But these authors assert: "Class warfare has been waged for a long time, mostly from the top down, against both workers and the middle class."

Also, class awareness that identifies socioeconomic reality would permit and require a very different reading of scripture, which teems, in both testaments, with class reality and class awareness. Rieger and Kwok invite such an alternative reading of scripture. Class can be a powerful descriptor without any inordinate polemic attached to it. The familiar democratic palaver about everyone being in the same boat is an obfuscation. Rieger and Kwok identify some of the major players, intellectuals and activists who may empower the 99 percent to undertake a

*Reviewed by Walter Brueggemann, whose most recent book is The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word (Fortress).*

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sustained action in the service of democracy.

The second major accent point is the book's theological focus. The authors insist that "theology is not a luxury," and they demonstrate in a compelling way that the contest for social power both reflects theological assumptions and generates and reinforces those assumptions. The transnational capitalist class, with its top-down absolutism, wants to present the status quo as the "only reality, . . . with another world viewed as impossible." This realized eschatology at its worst depends on an absolutist God who will be the only decider of everything and who then becomes a model for absolutist human deciders.

Conversely, the multitude imagines and attests to God as an agent who is allied with a subversive agency, which may create space and alternative social possibility in the face of hegemony. In a riff that would please Richard Dawkins for a moment until he understood it, these authors assert:

Atheism has a point. . . . The deepest problem of our common images of God, supported by conservatives and liberals alike, is that images of the divine as omnipotent, impassible, and immutable tend to mirror the dominant powers that be, from ancient emperors to modern CEOs. No wonder people talk about God also as "the guy in the sky" or the "man upstairs." . . . This connection of God and the dominant powers is no mere coincidence, it seems to us. . . . Christians have more in common with certain forms of atheism than with certain forms of theism. . . . The dominant theism of the Roman Empire was closely linked to classical theistic images of God as omnipotent, immutable, and impassible.

They offer this alternative:

Rethinking God from the bottom up, from the incarnation of God in a carpenter day laborer at home in a provincial part of the country, is at the very heart of Christianity and guides

our efforts to reimagine the divine. . . . Both humanity and divinity can . . . move from the bottom up.

The book finishes with a scenario of what the church of the multitude might look like, a church devoted to reciprocity with a God who relates to the vulnerable in vulnerable ways.

This argument, voiced with passion, is at the edge of an intense summons to fresh thinking and fresh action. None of this is strikingly new; Rieger and Kwok draw on earlier expositions of the defining reality of a theology that is linked to worldly power. The volume merits attention, however, because the authors voice these matters with compelling freshness and draw them close to the facts on the ground. The book calls the transnational capitalist class—which occupies all of the symbol-generating venues in society—to wake from its dogmatic slumber. Its accent on theology is a reminder of the peculiar work that has been entrusted to the synagogue and the church that is variously presented as narrative, oracle or song, centered on exodus and crucifixion.

Rieger and Kwok entertain the thought that the Occupy movement, a modest global awakening, is a chance that a church that is too much formed by the transnational capitalist class will notice its natural constituency elsewhere. They conclude with the recognition that the theologies of the empire are "finished theologies." The work of the multitude, however, is an unfinished theology that thrives among those who rally around Moses and Jesus.

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Sea Raven, D.Min., is an Associate of the Westar Institute (home of the Jesus Seminar), and a Lay Minister for Worship in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland.

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New: January 2013  
ISBN-13: 978-1481070591  
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# HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

Essays from  
the *Christian  
Century*



**13 prominent  
Christian theologians  
speak of their  
journeys of faith  
and of the questions  
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## Dear Life: Stories

By Alice Munro

Knopf, 336 pp., \$26.95

The women in many of Alice Munro's stories are fleeing, in quiet and not-so-quiet ways. A woman has an affair while on a train on her way to Toronto. A young girl in a controlling family runs away with a saxophone player. A repressed woman throws a party without telling her husband. In "Gravel," the mother of the narrator walks out on a traditional marriage into an arrangement with an actor.

She'd walked out on her silver and her china and her decorating scheme and her flower garden and even on the books in her bookcase. She would live now, not read. She'd left her clothes hanging in the closet and her high-heeled shoes in their shoe trees. Her diamond ring and her wedding ring on the dresser. Her silk nightdresses in their drawer. She meant to go around naked at least some of the time in the country, as long as the weather stayed warm.

Munro's women flee bad marriages and unfortunate circumstances, but more than anything they seem to be fleeing an interior sense of limitation and self-chosen boundaries. The men they leave behind are rarely bad or evil, and Munro treats her fleeing women with a lightness and a sense of humor that is different from the work of her feminist predecessors, like Kate Chopin. As the narrator of "Gravel" contemplates her

mother's desire to go naked, she says, "That didn't work out, because when she tried it Caro went and hid in her cot and even Neal said he wasn't crazy about the idea."

The way that Munro's characters conceive of freedom from their limited places in the world do not often match up well with freedom itself. The woman who runs away with the saxophone player has an affair with her minister and loses her children. The woman who has an affair on the train panics when her young child goes missing during her indiscretion. Often the quest for freedom ends up harming others, or a bid for freedom gets tangled in the nets of daily life. Munro's characters wash up on shore—changed, but not finally released from the difficult work of being human amidst other humans.

Munro respects the pursuit of freedom, however, even as she questions it. Her language is restrained; she never overreaches. If anything, she is too careful, as if reluctant to impinge on her characters' choices or make judgments about them. When she refuses judgment, she invites a kind of compassion that is spare and even stern, but ultimately loving.

The language she uses to tell these stories is likewise spare, but also beautiful. Occasionally, it is even luminous. In "Amundsen," a young woman has taken a teaching position at a sanatorium in northern Canada. She steps off the train into this new land.

Then there was silence, the air like ice. Brittle-looking birch trees with black marks on their white bark, and some kind of small untidy evergreens rolled up like sleepy bears. The frozen lake not level but mounded along the shore, as if the waves had turned to ice in the act of falling. And the building beyond with its deliberate rows of windows, and its glassed in porches at either end. Everything austere and northerly, black-and-white under the

## MISSING AN ISSUE?

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Reviewed by Amy Frykholm, *CENTURY* associate editor and author of *See Me Naked: Stories of Sexual Exile in American Christianity* (Beacon).



high dome of clouds. But the birch bark not white after all as you got closer. Grayish yellow, grayish blue, gray.

At first, the language is as sharp and divided as the landscape. You can feel the icy air and the bareness of the terrain. But a subtle shift in perception emerges as the woman gazes on this new horizon. This shift prefigures her own movement in the story, as she learns to see and respond to her new environment. At first she sees only black and white, but she will also need to see various shades of gray.

At the end of this collection, Munro includes four autobiographical sketches that she says are “not quite stories.” “I believe they are the first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life,” she writes. Each one is a meditation on how she learned the art of storytelling and how she learned to discern reality in the midst of things grown-ups told her. Munro depicts herself as a child and as a young woman trying to make sense of the stories other people offered her as true.

At the beginning of the first of these sketches, Munro acknowledges the difficulty she has had in untangling her own reality from her mother’s. Consequently, the narrator of these sketches is deeply suspicious of all received reality—suspicious of herself as a narrator and of others. “Why do I say ominous?” she questions herself. “I didn’t feel frightened.” This tension between the story as it is received and the story as it perhaps is haunts her at every turn.

Questions about the distinction between fiction and reality seem to grow rather than diminish as Munro ages (she is now in her eighties). The final stories before the not quite stories are about older women who cannot quite discern what is fictional and what is real about their own circumstances. As in the autobiographical sketches, the author is haunted by the inescapable truth that creating a story about reality is in a sense creating reality itself. Munro’s first and last subject is the possibility and responsibility that come with that pursuit.

## BookMarks

### Open Heart

By Elie Wiesel

Knopf, 96 pp., \$20.00

Wiesel survived Auschwitz in his youth, but at 82 years of age he wondered whether he’d survive emergency bypass surgery. As with many experiencing a potentially life-threatening procedure, he used the occasion to reflect back over his life, drawing on the Jewish conviction that it is life that is sanctified, not death. Had he done enough to help spare the world another genocide? After surgery he pondered whether the experience had changed him. Would he refrain from certain acts and accomplish others differently in the future? “I believe that the answer is yes,” he concluded. The real questions, though—ones having to do with the Creator and his creation—have no answers. “Since God is, He is to be found in the questions as well as in the answers.”

### A Season of Mystery: Ten Spiritual Practices for Embracing a Happier Second Half of Life

By Paula Huston

Loyola Press, 224 pp., \$14.95 paperback

The curmudgeonly old are notorious for “close-mindedness, complaining, fear of change, obsessing about comfort and security, boredom, denial, resentment, judgmentalism, hoarding, and cursing an increasingly unfamiliar world.” But the latter years of life don’t have to be this way, and Huston points the reader in another direction. Drawing on her own experiences as a grandmother and Camaldolese oblate and the writings of Christian mystics, Huston introduces ten grace-filled practices that not only are antidotes to these stereotypical attitudes of the elderly but can actually enhance the aging process. For instance, the practice of delighting helps us to appreciate small things that may have escaped our attention earlier in life. Most important is the practice of memento mori: remembering we will die, which can actually help us accept death.

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# ON Media

## Supernatural romance

The film *Beautiful Creatures*, based on a young adult novel by Margaret Stohl and Kami Garcia, opened in theaters on Valentine's Day, staking its claim as the supernatural romance of the post-*Twilight* era. It's the story of a mortal boy, Ethan Wate (Alden Ehrenreich), and a girl who is a caster (or witch), Lena Duchannes (Alice Englert), whose love is doomed by an ancient curse that forbids pairings between mortals and casters. To complicate matters, Lena is approaching her 16th birthday, when her nascent powers will reach full bloom and be claimed for dark or light. Presumably, she has no choice in her "claiming." Her hidden "true nature"—in the book it's like a magic toss of the coin—will decide for her. Lena's own mother, Sarafine (Emma Thompson, committed to her role with almost delirious delight), "went dark" and is on a mission to take Lena with her.

Like most teenagers caught in a situation they cannot control, Lena sulks; she also writes broody poetry in a tattered journal. Falling for Ethan upends this passivity. It is Ethan's stubborn, human insistence that Lena can control her own destiny, or at least change her fate, that supplies the title to the film and the book. Lena's uncle says to Ethan: "Mortals. I envy you. You think you can change things. Stop the universe. Undo what was done long before you came along. You are such beautiful creatures."

As far as paranormal teenage romance goes, this plot is standard. What better way to give voice to the turmoil of adolescence than to paint it in terms of supernatural, life-or-death battles be-

tween good and evil? When you are 16, figuring out if young love is real can feel like a life or death matter.

Similar themes appear in *The Vampire Diaries*, a soap opera on the CW TV network about teenage vampires, werewolves, witches and doppelgängers, now in its fourth season. In that series, the quest to prove that a newly turned vampire really does love her maker—and is not just compelled to love him—might literally cause the end of the world. Countless song lyrics bear witness to the desire to be "real" in a world that feels fake and manufactured. In the film *Warm Bodies*, a zombie-meets-girl romance, that same worry is externalized in a zombie apocalypse, the cure for which is genuine human connection.

Again and again, Ethan encourages Lena to "claim herself." Only then, presumably, will she be free to claim him. As Lena moves closer to Ethan's human world, *Beautiful Creatures* might have presented just one more optimistic message to teens: Own your own destiny! Be your own person!

When Lena does claim herself, however, the result does not fit Ethan's teenage fantasies. Her most powerful act of agency is to give Ethan up in order to secure his safety and resist the dark powers. Choosing a fate that, in the world of adolescent love, is worse than death, she casts a spell on him so that he forgets he ever knew her.

This act of sacrifice works only because Lena and Ethan's story is not entirely their own. The curse that thwarts their love is part of a long history involving betrayed lovers, Civil War deserters, town secrets,

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**FORBIDDEN ROMANCE:** A film about love between a mortal and a witch explores the meaning of agency and sacrifice.

family heirlooms and honored promises. To break the curse, Lena has to accept her role in this history. She has to allow competing claims of love—from Ethan, her uncle, even the twisted love of her mother—to influence her decisions.

The history that is supposed to hold the lovers in a web of human and supernatural connections owes more to the History Channel than history books. But the film taps into an unexpected understanding of agency: Lena finds her power within the ties that bind, not in trying to unbind them.

Since this is a love story, she gets Ethan back, of course. But despite the story's refrain of "Claim yourself," these young adults turn out to be already claimed—by histories and communities and bonds of love and commitment that they only begin to understand. They have to embrace the history that claims them in order to claim the power to live and love.

Reviewed by Kathryn Reklis, who teaches at Fordham University in New York City.



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(Continued from page 6)

## Adapting to change . . .

Was there a sociologist at the “Adaptive faith” roundtable (Feb. 20)? Sociologists conceive of social order as a normative or moral order. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it an acutely *conscious* and *intentional* moral order—one that centers in a conception of and passion for social justice and in an expectation that perfect justice will eventually prevail. That this will come about in a process of dying and rising with Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:19–20) is quite consistent with the successive cycles of innovation, growth and obsolescence in biological evolution.

The vigorous growth of a species population with a more fit adaptation to changed or changing conditions involves the decline and usually the extinction of the less fit. Identification with the dying and rising Christ could well be regarded as the creative cultural mutation that accounts for the vigorous growth of

Christian civilization over 2,000 years—and that could encourage the expectation of a surprise great awakening in our time of globalization and global threat to the survival of humankind.

Both pro- and antireligion evolutionists are in the same social justice tradition. Dawkins might enjoy as I do Jesus’ penetrating vignette of the Pharisee going to the temple to pray and pushing himself up while pushing the publican down (Luke 18:9–14). We need to translate the Christian gospel from the theoretical language of an ancient world to the scientific language of a modern worldview.

F. Mervin Baker  
Grass Valley, Calif.

## Educating about guns . . .

I find your gospel-filled magazine very educational. Let me return the favor by offering a brief education about guns, as your editorial (“Of guns and neighbors,” Feb. 6) has some simple errors that would quickly cause those knowledgeable about guns to ignore the rest of the editorial.

You refer to “limits on the number of bullets that gun clips can hold.” Clips are metal sleeves that hold bullets in a group for speed-loading magazines. Magazines are the squarish metal containers, containing a spring mechanism, that lock into a gun and push the bullets one by one into the firing chamber. What you want to limit is the number of bullets that go into a magazine.

You refer to a “reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons.” That ban was arguably a ban just on weapons that look like they are assault weapons. While they look alike, there is a substantial difference between the AR-15 semiautomatic rifle that is sold to civilians and the fully automatic M-16 military assault rifle used only by the military. Semiautomatic weapons fire one bullet per trigger pull. Fully automatic weapons keep firing bullets until the trigger is released. The AR-15 limited to a ten-round magazine is no more dangerous than the average semiautomatic wood hunting rifle with a ten-round magazine.

Jim Wire  
St. Louis, Mo.

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by Philip Jenkins

In recent months, observers have remarked on the growing number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation (the “nones”), whose numbers are highest among the young. We can argue about just what these numbers mean, but possibly they do mark the beginning of a secularizing trend, a drift toward European conditions. Surprisingly perhaps, given our customary assumptions about Latin America, conditions in several Latin American nations mirror those in the U.S. Increasingly these countries are developing a European coloring.

Several factors shape a country’s religious outlook, and prosperity and the welfare net certainly play a role. A country’s fertility rate also tells us a lot about attitudes toward religion. When a country develops economically, women are needed to enter the workforce rather than remain in the home. Meanwhile, shifting religious values place less pressure on women to have large families. In turn, smaller families mean diminished links with religious structures—fewer children go through religious education or first communion classes. And couples who have decided to limit families tend to run up against church policies on issues of contraception and abortion. When sexuality is separated from conception and child-rearing, people are more open to non-traditional family structures, including gay unions. Whatever the causes, the

## A secular Latin America?

European experience indicates that countries where the fertility rate falls well below replacement (2.1 children per woman) might be facing rapid secularization.

With that figure in mind, let’s look at the countries of Latin America, and especially the most economically developed ones. A few decades ago, all had classic Third World population profiles and very large families. In the 1960s, for instance, Brazil’s fertility rate hovered around 6 children per woman, alarming those who warned of a global population explosion. By 2012, though, Brazil’s figure was 1.82, far below replacement level. Chile and Uruguay both record similar rates of 1.87. Argentina is still above replacement, but the rate is falling fast. That’s a social revolution in progress—as well as a gender revolution.

In religious terms, these countries present a complex picture, with strong evidence of a continuing passion for religion. Brazil is home to some spectacularly successful Pentecostal megachurches, which Catholic clergy seek to imitate in order to hold on to believers. New evangelical churches are also booming in the other Latin nations, to the point that Protestants claim to be living through a new Reformation.

At the same time, though, signs of secularization appear that would have been unthinkable not long ago. Nine

percent of Brazilians now say they follow no religion, and the proportion of nones is much higher among those under 20. Uruguay emerges as the region’s most secular country, with 40 percent having no religious affiliation.

Gay marriage offers a useful gauge of transformation. Uruguay passed a national civil union law in 2009 and seems on course to establish full marriage rights for gays. Brazil approved same-sex unions in 2004, with gay marriages following, subject to some local discretion. Argentina legalized same-sex marriage in 2010.

Abortion laws offer a more mixed picture. Uruguay permits abortions through the first trimester, while Brazil grants terminations to safeguard the life of the mother or in cases of rape. On both these test issues, Chile stands out as a conservative bastion, with a strict abortion law and no prospect of gay marriage rights. Otherwise, however, the region shows a major trend toward liberalizing morality on issues that both Protestant and Catholic churches hold dear. Over the coming decade, we will probably see liberal reforms triumphing in several more countries, with the churches doing little more than fighting rearguard actions.

Obviously, Latin America

is a vast and complex region with many widely differing societies, and no single model works across the whole continent. Uruguay is a radically secular outlier, while countries like Colombia remain staunchly conservative. Most significant, though, is the clear set of trends that we see in several of the most influential countries, especially Brazil. Although Brazil is a long way from European secularization, we can foresee the emergence of a triangular political setup involving Pentecostals, Catholics and secularists and a constantly shifting balance of coalitions and alliances.

Of the three groups, the Catholics are undoubtedly the weakest, because the acute shortage of priests has so reduced the church’s strength on the ground. Also, most of the new nones are former Catholics who abandon the church without making the transition to Pentecostal congregations. This is very bad news for a church that officially lists Brazil as one of the world’s largest Catholic nations. In practice, many of those notional Catholics have already defected to other faiths—or to none.

We should certainly not start writing the obituary for Latino faith. But that faith will be taking quite surprising forms in the near future.

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*Philip Jenkins is a scholar at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University.*



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# ON Art



*St. Ann Christ (with detail), by Chris Scala*

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—Lil Copan





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